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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, SCHOOL-WIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS: A CASE STUDY ANALYZING PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND DISCIPLINE DIRECTION IN ONE MIDDLE SCHOOL, by SONYA VASSAR BROWN, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

---

Nicholas J. Sauers, Ph.D.  
Committee Chair

---

Sheryl Cowart Moss, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Kendra Washington-Bass, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

William L. Curlette, Ph.D.  
Chairperson, Department of Educational Policy Studies

---

Paul A. Alberto, Ph.D.  
Dean  
College of Education and Human Development

## **AUTHOR'S STATEMENT**

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Sonya V. Brown  
Department of Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education and Human Development  
Georgia State University

The director of this dissertation is:

Nicholas J. Sauers, Ph.D.  
Department of Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education and Human Development  
Georgia State University  
Atlanta, GA 30303

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Sonya V. Brown

ADDRESS: Department of Educational Policy Studies  
30 Pryor Street SW, Room 450  
Atlanta GA 30303

### EDUCATION:

Ed.D.	2018	Georgia State University Educational Leadership
Specialists Degree	2015	Georgia State University Educational Leadership
Masters Degree	1997	University of Mississippi Educational Leadership
Bachelors Degree	1993	Mississippi State University Educational Leadership

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2014-Present	Assistant Principal Gwinnett County Public Schools
2014	Cluster Summer School Assistant Principal Gwinnett County Public Schools
2010-2014	Teacher Gwinnett County Public Schools
2001-2004	Teacher Atlanta Public Schools

### PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS:

Berry, J., Moss, S. C., Bryant, K., Gore, P., and Brown, S. V. (2016, November). *Clinical scholarship: A critical conversation on navigating the structures of the clinical line within the academy to improve leadership preparation programs*. Peer reviewed presentation to the University Council for Educational Administration Annual Conference, Detroit, MI.

Brown, S.V. (2015, June). *Leadership through Collaboration*. Gwinnett County Public Schools: Summer Leadership Conference, Suwanee, GA.

## AWARDS

2017	Outstanding Doctor of Education in Education Leadership Award Georgia State University
2017	Gwinnett County Public School Local Leadership Winner
2015	Outstanding Performance Based Leadership Award Georgia State University

## PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

2018	Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development
2013	Professional Association for Georgia Educators
2013	Local School Administrators Association

SCHOOL-WIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS:  
A CASE STUDY ANALYZING PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND DISCIPLINE DIRECTION  
IN ONE MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

SONYA BROWN

Under the Direction of Nicholas J. Sauer, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

It is no secret that many schools struggle with student behavior. Educators are concerned with how to effectively and positively manage student conduct. By drawing on research from a variety of discipline approaches including zero tolerance, discretionary discipline, and exclusionary discipline, the review of literature points out that these methods often negatively affect students. As an answer to the perennial issue of student misbehavior, some schools have chosen to implement behavior intervention programs intended to increase educational seat time and decrease office discipline referrals. The purpose of this qualitative study was (1) to examine the study participants' perceptions of the impact of leadership behaviors on SWPBIS implementation and (2) to examine how the participants perceived the impact of leadership on school climate and student behavior under SWPBIS implementation. This dissertation drew from the conceptual underpinning of constructivism to investigate how a middle school in the Southeastern United States implemented SWPBIS. Data were collected in the case study through

structured, face to face interviews with an administrator and several teachers regarding the implementation of SWPBIS. Few studies of SWPBIS if any, investigate the implementation fidelity in middle schools using national, state, and local SWPBIS guidelines along with interviews and school observations. For this study, data were gathered from one school site that experienced a decline in office discipline referrals over the past few years since the program's inception. Study participants represented various grade levels and departments, each having worked at the school during the beginning stages of SWPBIS. The key findings revealed insights to some of the significant factors that influenced the implementation at the school as well as some of the barriers and impediments for this initiative from the study participants' perspective. This study will add to the body of literature by shedding light on positive discipline practices used in a middle school.

INDEX WORDS: Office discipline referral, School climate, School culture, Zero Tolerance Policy, PBIS, SWPBIS



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by

SONYA BROWN

A Dissertation

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Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education and Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA  
2018

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## DEDICATION

I am grateful to God for blessing me with family, friends, and a rich legacy of educators who have lent their shoulders on which for me to stand. My mother, Katie J. Graves, my Aunt Georgia Crawford, and my cousins, Drs. Jerome Smith and Brenda Gates. Cousin Jerome, you were the first Doctor of Education that I met. I have always looked up to you.

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## 1 SCHOOL DISCIPLINE PRACTICES: EFFECTIVE YET POSITIVE

Mayworm and Sharkey (2014) noted, “Discipline is an essential element of public schooling in the United States, and effective discipline practices are necessary to maintain classroom order, promote student learning, and ensure the safety of students and teachers” (p. 693). Teachers and administrators usually agree that educators spend too much time and energy devoted to classroom management techniques and discipline interventions. Students who exhibit inappropriate behavior frequently interrupt teaching (Hollingshead, Kroeger, Altus & Trytten, 2016). Gaston (2015) and Skaalvic and Skaalvic (2010) concurred by writing that consistent, equitable policies are needed to govern the behaviors of students. Out of a need for positive order, in recent years, the idea of a school-wide plan such as *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* (PBIS) and the more detailed *School-Wide Positive Behavioral and Interventions and Supports* (SWPBIS) have emerged (Sugai, 2003). The use of effective and positive school-wide discipline practices ensure that more teachers and students are making productive use of school and class time (Greenwood, Kratochwill, & Clements, 2008; Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005; Kennedy, Jordan, & Murphy, 2017; Pas & Bradshaw, 2012; Skiba & Sprague, 2008; Warren et al., 2006).

### Background of the Problem

The category of school discipline or behavior management often falls into the range of interpreting what individuals have deemed appropriate and necessary actions to take in the face of student non-compliance (Ugurlua et al., 2015). Ineffective school discipline practices have become a perennial problem in public schools across the United States (Devine, 1996; Kendziora & Osher, 2009; Morris & Howard, 2003). Historically, the objective of discipline has been to bring the impulses and conduct of students in line with the standards set by the local school, administrators,

and teachers (Nelson, 2002; Skiba, 2014). Nelson (2002) stated that time spent by teachers addressing discipline issues leads to students' lack of learning and leads to time spent off task. Educators cannot easily solve discipline problems by using old methods. Leaders cannot continue to run schools on a constant replay. Instead, leaders must actively research to find out what is working and to develop new directions (Hayes-Jacobs, 2010).

Mees (2008) questioned where the responsibility of discipline lies. Research varies in pinpointing the source of responsibility. Mees documented that schools must directly provide a quality education to all students. The United States is failing in this non-negotiable directive, in part by ineffective discipline practices (Mees, 2008). According to Khalil and Brown (2015), the responsibility of providing better education lies with administration. School leaders must do a better job of providing a meaningful education by improving cultural competency and increasing communication and commitment to serving students and the community. Teachers and leaders should set limits and guide student behavior with emphasis on having culturally responsive classrooms, which consists of students having a voice, a supportive environment, situation appropriateness, and data for equality (Levenson, Smith, McIntosh, Rose & Pinkelman, 2016). In this type of classroom, students exhibit proper behavior out of a sense of personal obligation, not out of fear of punishment or because they desire a reward (Hollingshead, et al., 2016; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). In a culturally responsive classroom, the teacher is committed to knowing, understanding, and valuing different cultures by respecting the diversified background of their students (Dianbing & Xinxiao, 2017).

Schools reflect society, which now encompasses multiple cultural identities and connections. Teachers enter schools bringing their cultural identities with them. Administrators must be cognizant of diversity when hiring and provide staff training on how to understand



students and be better equipped when discipline issues arise (Anderson, 2000; Khalil & Brown, 2015; Hollingshead et al., 2016; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Mendels (2012) and Elmore (2000) confirmed that it is the responsibility of the school's leadership to provide a good education by protecting instructional time from interferences such as discipline, but also by shaping a vision of academic success for all students, based on high standards.

Kritsonis (2015) took more of a grassroots view in believing that many discipline problems referred to administrators may be teacher generated. When a discipline problem exists, teachers should use the process of self-evaluation because, at times, individuals or groups working to solve a problem could be self-consciously or consciously contributing to the issue (Beatty-O'Ferrall, Green, & Hanna, 2010; Kristonis, 2015; Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008). Ugurlua et al. (2015) agreed by suggesting that teachers sometimes view unwanted behaviors within society as also unwanted within the classroom, analyzing the perception of discipline on this basis of pre-judgment. Teachers that are competent in their classroom management approaches tend to have fewer issues (Cramer & Bennett, 2015). Successful teachers often evaluate their practices in terms of the impact on class discipline (Kritsonis, 2015; Sahin, 2015). In order to find solutions, educators should give more attention, through intentional conversation, to changes that might be necessary when managing students and their behavior (Englehart, 2014).

In the United States, all students have the right to a free and public education. Unfortunately, discipline issues have somewhat hampered this right (Mees, 2008; Onderi, & Odera, 2012). Khalil and Brown (2015) agreed by saying that unequal distribution and training of quality administrators and teachers, coupled with poor strategies, may be contributing to the issue. A need exists to understand what the discipline issues are, who owns the problem, and what strategies will

provide appropriate solutions (Greenwood, Kratchwell, & Clements, 2008; Khalil & Brown, 2015; Nelson, 2002).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Schools need plans and systems to be proactive versus reactive when dealing with behavioral issues (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012). When teachers or administrators spend too much time practicing reactionary discipline, instructional time suffers (Hollingshead et al., 2016). According to the Department of Education (2014), there is an urgent need for effective classroom discipline practices. Research shows that systems or practices such as SWPBIS can provide a positive means to effectively educate students while decreasing unwanted behavior (Caldarella, Shatzer, Gray, Young & Young, 2011; Miramontes, Marchant, Health, & Fisher, 2011; Molloy, Moore, Trail, Van Epps, & Hopfer, 2013; Pas & Bradshaw, 2012).

Plans or systems such as SWPBIS are dependent upon the support of teachers and administrators to implement effectively (Pas & Bradshaw, 2012). A step towards achieving support would be to gain a better understanding or measurement of fidelity through analyzing School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports implementation data and the perceptions of educators when implementing the plan, as well as potential barriers (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Lane, Kalberg, Bruhn, Driscoll, & Elliot, 2009).

According to Molloy, Moore, Trail, Van Epps, and Hopfer (2013), a need exists for further studies about the implementation fidelity of SWPBIS. Studies that speak to the effectiveness of prevention programs in the schools are limited which leaves a gap in the literature as to the measure of data reporting when taken to scale (Molloy et al., 2013). Cramer and Bennett (2015) concurred by saying that the task of providing all students a quality education is still incumbent

upon educational leaders, and this challenge is particularly difficult in the middle grades as young adolescents are on the cusp of intellectual thought. Cramer and Bennett (2015) penned,

Because they are forming their identities as students who will or will not go on to successfully complete high school or postsecondary education, their experiences with discipline in the middle grades can form a positive or negative tipping point. We must teach behaviors characterized by respect, possibility, and curiosity. (p. 24)

Although PBIS has a rich and lengthy history of setting up environments that promote positive behaviors and increase academic achievement for many students, more research should be done to find the best manner in which PBIS should be implemented in middle grades (Vincent, Tobin, Hawken, & Frank, 2012). Research is needed to examine how teachers and leaders implement the program and how quality impacts to program outcomes (Molloy et al. 2013). Leaders, or principals, can use relational practices to influence positive outcomes (Devono & Price, 2012). This study examined the implementation guidance by looking at the perceptions of teachers and an administrator and their level of influence focusing on the nucleus of discipline within the organization (Bandura, 1993; Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010; Mehdinezhad, & Mansouri, 2016). Implementation quality matters. The higher the quality of delivery, the more likely the school will produce the desired results (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

While PBIS is becoming a trusted and well-known strategy by name, the majority of research focuses narrowly on prevention levels district-wide or within a grade level setting, with less focus on examples and illustrations of effectiveness (Crimmins & Farrell, 2006). Ross (2012) posited that analyzing how PBIS is effective in different cultural and social environments will strengthen the empirical evidence. Although some research examined the effectiveness of PBIS, very few studies have investigated how PBIS affects the connection of discipline referrals,

suspensions, and leader effectiveness (Mees, 2008; Netzel & Eber, 2003). This study contributes to the aforementioned research.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the implementation of a School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports program by analyzing the SWPBIS data and the perceptions and practices of teachers and an administrator implementing a SWPBIS program. Perceptions of teachers and a school administrator regarding the system's impact on classroom management plans, school climate, and student behavior were examined (Dykes, 2015).

### **Guiding Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are study participants' perceptions of the impact of leadership behaviors on PBIS implementation?
2. How do study participants perceive the impact of leadership on school climate and student behavior under the implementation of PBIS?

### **Review**

This literature review begins with a discussion of the history of discipline and common issues in the classroom. Next, the research focuses on how policies such as Zero Tolerance (ZT) have opened the door for subjective punishments, also known as discretionary discipline (Dykes, 2015; Skiba, 2014). The review then covers discretionary discipline, which can lead to exclusionary discipline. Researchers define exclusionary discipline as a process of removing a student from the learning environment through suspension (Porter, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). Subsequently, the research presents the relationship between discipline and school climate along with the role that teachers and administrators have in ensuring that they are handling discipline effectively and positively. According to Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) both past and

present research supports the view that student learning is immediately affected by discipline, which is an organic part of the organizational culture and climate of the school.

Finally, the review presents an overview of literature related to PBIS that is used to positively curtail discipline and improve student behavior management. This strategy or system is School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. SWPBIS is an implementation technique that could be key to the school-wide success for all students (Bradshaw, 2013; Caldarella et al., 2011; Matthews, McIntosh, Frank, May, 2014; Sugai, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, & Dickey, 2011).

### **History of Discipline and Classroom Issues**

As schools work to satisfy the requirements of the district, local school, and community, concerns and questions exist regarding discipline processes and protocols that schools employ (Byrne, 1999; Kendziora & Osher, 2009; Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010). Students have the right to learn in a safe and nurturing environment. At the same time, administrators are accountable for maintaining this environment and for exercising effective and equitable disciplinary strategies and techniques to achieve this goal (Alsubaie, 2015; Buckmaster, 2016; Skiba, 2014).

Discipline is defined or referred to as issues, obstacles, and influences that would detract from the instructional time of focus (Alsubaie, 2015; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Osher, Bear, Sprayer, and Doye (2010) described school discipline as having two different aims: management of student behavior and development of student self-discipline. School discipline, as well as ineffective practices, has been an issue of concern as many researchers have documented the problem going back to the beginning of United States schooling during early colonialism (Empey & Stafford, 1991; Greenberg, 1999; Regoli & Hewitt, 1997; Lewis, 2007).

No matter the educator's experience, most have encountered various aspects of discipline issues. Cartledge, Tillman, and Johnson (2001) wrote, "Few would argue that the most common image in our society associated with discipline is punishment, particularly of children" (p. 18). However, research shows some writers as early as the 1800s suggested that methods used to maintain order should not necessarily involve punishments. For example, Hall (as cited by Brown & Kritsonis, 1992) suggested other methods such as reasonable assignments, impartiality, organization, and student responsibility as proactive ways to maintain order. Even with writings such as Hall's, negative punishment existed well into the next centuries, much of which is subjective (Gregory et al., 2016).

### **Movement Towards Exclusionary Discipline**

As discipline and classroom management became a more documented topic of discussion, during the decade of the 1960's, corporal punishment was found to be the most collective method of discipline given if a student did not follow the rules of the school (Skiba et al., 2011). School officials were able to punish students with or without their parents' permission, sometimes rather subjectively (Skiba et al., 2011). According to Kennedy, Jordan, and Murphy (2017), research has shown that corporal punishment can have detrimental effects on students. It is more about the adult control than the well-being of the student (Kennedy et al., 2017). Recent studies also suggest that disproportionate use of corporal punishment persists along the lines of race and social class, which leaves students of color and those living in poverty at a higher disadvantage (Northington 2007; United States Department of Education, 2014). Public opinion has shifted its support away from its use in many geographical regions (United States Department of Education, 2014).

In the United States, corporal punishment no longer exists as a politically correct solution in public schools, so the task of finding other answers was incumbent upon the American school

system (Breshears, 2014). Fast forward to the last few years, according to Skiba (2014) school officials felt that removing the offenders from the classroom was more effective than corporal punishment. So, on the heels of physical punishment, schools then moved to office discipline referrals and exclusionary discipline (Cohen, 2012; Horner & Sugai, 2005). According to Mitchell and Bradshaw (2013), exclusionary discipline strategies usually encompass the immediate removal of the student from the classroom after misbehavior. Exclusionary discipline can include suspension, both in and out-of-school, and even expulsion from school depending upon the offense. According to Anderson and Ritter (2017) marginalized students are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline. In addition, these students tend to receive longer punishments regardless of income level. The impact of exclusionary discipline has not been favorable (Skiba, 2014). Zero Tolerance is the rationale behind many exclusionary discipline cases.

### **Zero Tolerance**

Zero Tolerance Policy is a controversial practice used when dealing with discipline issues (Cartledge, Tillman, & Johnson, 2001; Martinez, 2009; Porter, 2015; Vidal-Castro, 2016). Zero tolerance requires school officials to hand down specific, consistent, and harsh punishment—usually suspension or expulsion—when students break specific rules. The punishment applies regardless of the circumstances, the reasons for the behavior (like self-defense), or the student's history of discipline problems (Curran, 2016; Skiba, 2014). According to Skiba (2014), the need for leaders to take more punitive action began in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s due to a culture of fear concerning violence in schools and classrooms thus intertwining culture and discipline. Society as a whole, which encompassed schools, was worried that violence in schools would become an uncontrollable norm (Skiba, 2014). ZT was the result, leading to high suspension and expulsion rates among all students (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Martinez, 2009; Thompson, 2016).

Legislation surrounding ZT has provided some guidelines for student discipline; however, the application of these guidelines has been ambiguous. School leaders and staff must continually familiarize themselves with current legislation to correctly apply guidelines. The loose policy interpretation tends to make many school districts uneasy (Allman & Slate, 2011; Kravevich, 2007; Verdugo & Glenn, 2002). Skiba (2008) led a study by the American Psychological Association task force. The task force declared:

An examination of evidence shows that Zero Tolerance Policies as implemented have failed to achieve the goals of an effective system of school discipline. Zero tolerance has not shown to improve school climate or school safety. Its application in suspension and expulsion has not proven an effective means of improving student behavior. It has not resolved and indeed may have exacerbated, minority over-representation in school punishments. Zero tolerance policies as applied appear to run counter to our best knowledge of child development. By changing the relationship between education and juvenile justice, zero tolerance may shift the focus of discipline from relatively inexpensive actions in the school setting to the highly costly process of arrest and incarceration. In so doing, zero tolerance policies have created unintended consequences for students, families, and communities. (Skiba, 2008, p. 860)

Discipline exists within a school's organization and can have multiple purposes, but it needs to be in order (Kajs, 2006). After nearly two decades, there is little evidence that shows ZT should remain in place as an effective approach or alternative in schools. Despite this finding, ZT policies that call for suspensions and expulsions have dramatically increased (Hirschfield, 2008; Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011; Kupchik, 2010; Skiba, et al. 2011). Research has also shown that ZT does more harm than good and is not necessarily a positive practice except within extreme



situations (DeMitchell & Hamcacher, 2016; Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2014). Barton and Nishioka (2014) concurred by pointing out that due to the increase in exclusionary discipline; disparities exist in how educators penalize different students for misbehavior.

### **Discretionary Discipline**

Discretionary discipline, when used loosely or improperly, further provides an opportunity for overrepresentation of school discipline of males, minorities, and special education students, creating the *school-to-prison pipeline* (Alexander, 2011; Aull, 2012; Cowan, 2016; McNeal, 2016; Nance, 2016; Porter, 2015; Skiba, 2014). Wald and Losen (2003) defined the school-to-prison pipeline as:

A journey through school that is increasingly punitive and isolating for its travelers—many of whom will be placed in restrictive special education programs, repeatedly suspended, held back in grades and banished to alternative “outplacements” before finally dropping or getting “pushed out” of school altogether. (p. 1)

Englehart (2014) stated that school officials have a wide range of opinions and strategies regarding what they believe are effective techniques for managing children's behavior in a classroom setting. Discipline issues are the most discussed topic among teachers at all grade levels and career stages (Englehart, 2014; Little & Akin-Little, 2008). Despite being such a popular topic, there is no perfect solution. Educators work to replace ineffective policies and practices such as discretionary and exclusionary discipline with more reasonable research-based ones (Losen, 2013). Discretionary discipline can lead to exclusionary discipline; the removal of a student from the classroom setting because of unwanted behavior (Skiba et al., 2011). School leaders should use this exclusionary discipline only when offenses are major and pose a safety concern such as weapons, drugs, or violent fighting (Fowler, 2011; Pfleger & Wiley, 2012). However, the opposite seems to be happening in many cases. According to Fowler (2011), despite public schools being a safe place

to learn, fear stemming from isolated, yet tragic, incidents such as Columbine and Sandy Hook have led officials to believe that punishing or excluding students that show signs of misbehavior would help prevent future tragedies. Thus, more and more office discipline referrals are written.

Adults use their own discretion in many of these cases. For example, Fowler (2011) wrote that in Texas during the 2009-2010 school year, "Sixty-eight percent of student referrals to alternative schools were discretionary, as were 72% of all student expulsions from Texas schools. Most student removals from the regular classroom were for disruptive behavior where no injury or weapon was involved" (p. 16). According to a study by the Public Policy Research Institute (2005) at Texas A&M University, "The single greatest predictor of future involvement in the juvenile system is a history of disciplinary referrals at school" (p. 16). Moreover, Bornstein (2015) said that schools should move their discipline practice from a punitive and exclusionary model to an inclusive one that approaches unwanted behavior therapeutically, which the literature and the law identified as best practice.

Because of the lack of solution-oriented conversations, schools face an ever-increasing number of difficult challenges (Marchant, Christensen, Womak, Conley, & Fisher, 2010). Teachers have the task of educating students from different backgrounds and cultures. Students are also in different stages of the learning process. Adding to the monumental task is the need to decrease the problem behavior while also taking care of the social and emotional needs of students (Englehart, 2014). Despite these challenges, educators are working hard to fulfill their mission of educating students and molding responsible citizens. With practice, using the right methods, educators will find ways that work in curbing discipline problems (Ediger, 2013; Marchant et al., 2010).

Once educators accept that discipline is a problem in many schools; they are professionally obligated to try to find answers to the problem (Fullan, 2011; Mendler, Curwin, & Mendler, 2008; Theoharis, 2007). Administrators and teachers need ideas and solutions as to how to best handle these discipline issues, while still providing a quality education. Educators work hard to minimize student disruptions; however, despite their efforts, even the best teachers tend to face student misbehavior at some point in their careers and thus require training in how to recognize if and when a problem might exist (Mendler et al., 2008). Undesirable factors of student discipline that affect the classroom can manifest in multiple ways. McGinnis and Goldstein (1997) wrote, “Students may be unmotivated to participate when requested, actively resist group involvement, or fail to see the relevance of the skills to their everyday lives” (p. 167). No matter a student’s reasoning for misbehaving, if students behave in a resistive manner, this behavior may interfere not only with their skill acquisition but also with the learning of others within the educational setting (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997).

Geiger (2000) found that out of all discipline problems, there were three main offenses. The ranking of occurrences was disruption (classroom noise or talking), acts of inattention (being off task, not doing one’s work, or out of seat), and defiance (disrespect or disobedience). Geiger’s study concluded the behavior problems were more of a disruptive nature rather than severe behavior issues, which again lend themselves to discretionary discipline.

While the conceiving of 21st-century schools has included much discussion on curriculum and instruction, ever-changing demands and conditions, necessitate the need to amend the way educators manage student behavior (Hayes-Jacobs, 2010). To handle these demands, educators would fare well to put emphasis on finding special procedures to assist in managing the classroom effectively (Ediger, 2013; Englehart, 2014). Englehart (2014) suggested the traditional means of

disciplining students are problematic and becoming increasingly outdated. He offered a proactive approach of forming a discipline team to review, define, and communicate the rules and expectations to teachers and students with an added layer of support from counselors. Discipline policies and practices must be more at the forefront of change conversations in the field of education (Englehart, 2014). Conversations involve understanding other's points of views and their ideas and perceptions. Through these conversations, opportunities to build relationships occur (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Sterrett (2012) agreed by writing, "In our evolving world of education, one thing remains constant: Our success hinges on our ability to build effective relationships with students" (p. 72). Classrooms are the heartbeat of a school and discipline issues most often arise within the classroom setting causing leaders to look for answers and become quick to make biased decisions (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012) that may affect the school's environment and atmosphere.

### **School Culture and Climate Perception**

Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) defined *culture* as a group's personality based on values and beliefs. Using a predetermined definition, discipline in this context means inappropriate behaviors of students in a school (Allman & Slate, 2011; Bolman & Deal, 2013). Culture and discipline go hand-in-hand with one affecting the other throughout the school and the community (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). According to Gruenert and Whitaker, if parents feel that discipline is a priority in schools, then they will trust the school to keep their child safe. Parents will tend to feel that their child is part of an environment that provides a proper education (Gruenert & Whitaker (2015). However, when parents do not feel that discipline is a priority or that their child is unsafe, then they associate this insecurity with a lack of learning (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Hence, trust in the school depletes, and the culture suffers tremendously. If the school culture is not collaborative,

discipline issues can increase (Lockhart, 2015). The cultural landscape of today's schools is changing, and educators are looking for a handle on this change (Argyris, 2010; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Lockhart, 2015).

An individual cannot feel culture. Rather, culture is simply the way the organization does business; a collective process which evolves in a shared frame of one's beliefs, important symbols, and one's values (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). However, the culture does determine whether improvement is possible. Organizations can make cultural changes, but these changes are sometimes slow evolutions taking at least three years for everyone to grasp and accept the change (Fiore, 2004; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Schein, 1992). A school's culture is critical to the success of the school. Bolman and Deal (2013) captured, "Although the culture of a school is not visible to the human eye, its artifacts and symbols reflect specific cultural priorities" (p. 641). The perception of culture at a school can have a bearing on the types of discipline problems at that school. According to Lockhart (2015), educators need to work hard to garner a positive perception of our current American school culture, so that society defines public educators as caring professionals, not just disciplinarians. Discipline challenges should not overshadow the work that goes on daily in public schools.

Culture pinpoints the method or type of strategy used when dealing with discipline at a school. Every school has a culture (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Marzano et al., 2005). Hanson (2001) shared the same view by writing schools have their own unique culture that tends to emphasize what is of importance to stakeholders as they strive to develop their knowledge base when going in a particular direction such as solving discipline issues.

School *climate* refers to the organization's attitude. While the climate is not as stable as the culture, it is nestled within the culture and plays a vital role in the success of the school (Gruenert

& Whitaker, 2015). One can feel climate upon entering a room. Per Gruenert and Whitaker (2015), climate is the way people feel about their organization or group and can change from day to day. When the organization makes positive cultural change, the climate is the first thing to improve. Climate is *around* us, while culture is a *part* of us. Culture is more challenging to change because it is hard to tell the difference in a perception versus a value and belief, unless one focuses on such a task (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). According to La Salle, Zabek, and Meyers (2016), leaders should pay attention to efforts that help to support and promote positive school climates. Within this support, it is incumbent for authority figures to recognize that some students might need additional support in understanding how to behave within the acceptable boundaries of their school's expectations (Pas & Bradshaw, 2012).

According to Watson and Hodges (2013), "Climate is the measure and culture is the change agent" (p 8). Schools are where students should feel safe and learn positive social lessons. If the school climate is not positive, students will underperform, and student attendance and school discipline are not likely to improve. Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) stated that a school's climate is a window into its culture, and climate is a learned response that the culture will teach the new members of the group. It is essential for leaders and members of the school to be aware of its climate; which stems from perception. Watson and Hodges (2013) concluded that school climate is a product of intrinsic motivation and the personal actions of the classroom teachers and the school leaders.

Both culture and climate are important aspects of the learning environment (La Salle, Zabek & Meyers, 2016). While they are not a written part of the educational curriculum, they have a bearing on how well the school performs in the educational arena. Schools are moving towards measuring both, to try and ensure positive outcomes (Watson & Hodges, 2013).

## **Leadership Roles in Culture and Climate**

Colan (2012) wrote that cultural leadership matters. In search of finding school leadership that worked, Marzano et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis examining 69 studies involving 2,802 schools. They concluded that culture is a natural by-product of individuals working closely together. Culture can have a positive or a negative influence on the school's effectiveness. Effective leaders work hard to build a culture that positively influences teachers; which bears a trickle-down effect to students (Marzano et al., 2005). In their findings, Marzano et al. stated that leaders have a specific responsibility to safeguard teachers by protecting instructional time from interruptions and protecting teachers from internal and external distractions. The leader has the responsibility to build that cultural relationship with stakeholders so that all involved have an opportunity to do their jobs properly. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) stated:

Leaders act through and with other people. Leaders sometimes do things, through words or actions, that have a direct effect on the primary goals of the collective, but more often their agency consists of influencing the thoughts and actions of other persons and establishing policies that enable others to be effective. (p. 8)

Hallinger (2000) wrote that the suitability or effectiveness of a school's organization depends on the leadership model used. The leadership model, in turn, links to factors in the external environment and the local context of a school (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Mulford & Silins, 2003). Hallinger's (2003) Instructional Leadership Model proposes three dimensions of the instructional leadership construct: (a) defining the school's mission, (b) managing the instructional program, and (c) promoting a positive school-learning climate and culture.

In contrast, in Copland's Longitudinal Study of Leadership Inquiry across a large school reform effort, Copland (2003) suggested a model for leadership that is less dependent on the

actions of individuals, but rather one that views leadership as a set of functions or qualities. The school community shares these qualities in a very broad sense. An example of such a model would be School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention Support. This program tends to focus on promoting social competence through the establishment of behavior expectations that are explicitly taught and reinforced by all school leaders consistently across all school settings (Burke, Davis, Hagan-Burke, Lee, & Fogarty, 2012; Ingram, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 2005). The leadership community would consist of administrators, teachers, and other professionals and community members both internal and external to the school (Copland, 2003). To affect student performance and discipline, leaders influence the purposes and goals of the school, the culture, school structure, social networks, and all stakeholders. Quality leadership matters for the aforementioned transformation to occur (Colan; 2012; Copland, 2003; Hallinger, 2000).

No matter the leadership model, promoting a positive school learning climate includes several functions: protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, and providing incentives for learning (Hallinger, 2000). Positive school climate reflects positive school culture, which in turn reflects positive discipline (Lockhart, 2015).

To attain sustainable educational leadership, the teachers, and the school's principal commit to the development of a school culture that cultivates strength and refinement with the passage of time (Hallinger, 2000; Owens & Valesky, 2011). According to Owens and Valesky (2011), the school leader should convincingly demonstrate an interest in promoting collegiality. The leader also needs to share an interest in shifting the norms of the school's culture from the traditional to more collaborative ways of working together. Owens and Valesky (2011) wrote, "The world of the school has power, structure, logic, and values, which combine to exert strong influence on the ways



in which individuals perceive the world, interpret it, and respond to it” (p. 1). Perceptions are significant. Culture is a natural by-product of colleagues, along with their perceptions, working in proximity. Culture can be a positive or negative influence on a school’s effectiveness. According to Holtzman, Dukes, and Page (2012), leaders should be change agents who are committed to fostering culturally responsive positive outcomes when addressing discipline challenges.

When educators gear behavioral programs towards teaching problem solving, conflict resolution and social instruction, all of which can improve the school climate, they create an environment where students and staff feel safe and free to learn. New members enter this culture and rejuvenate it. The members then adopt the new ways, and the climate progresses (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

School leaders have a major role in forming and sustaining an appropriate educational environment. Schools need leaders today who are prepared to address the challenges of education (Holtzman, Dukes, & Page, 2012; Kouzes & Posner, 2010). According to Fullan (2011), successful leaders understand the difference between information and knowledge. For example, we find information in computers, in books, and on paper. However, we find knowledge inside individuals (Fullan, 2011). Leading is not about telling subordinates what to value and what to do; it is about modeling and showing others how to do exactly what is being asked of them (Kouzes & Posner, 2010). Leaders pique the interest of the people they are leading bringing awareness to the organization’s vision (Gaston, 2015).

Fullan (2011) explained that supportive leaders have the ability to activate, extract, and electrify the moral commitment that is in the vast majority of teachers. According to Bosu, Dare, Dachi, and Fertiq (2011), within the culture of the school, members put the social values on public

display with the aim of indoctrinating particular ways of thinking and values amongst the students in the community. Leadership is key to the success of a school (Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008).

Murphy (2011) wrote, “The leadership literature and much of the apparatus in the educational workplace perpetuate the idea of the charismatic leader—charming, highly visible, full of dash, always on point, and somewhat noisy (in a nice way)” (p. 83). In contrast, leaders could simply be quietly effective. Leaders shape and mold the culture through modeling on a daily basis, and their actions are important for the sake of maintaining a safe, disciplined, controlled, and an educationally challenging, balanced environment (Colan, 2012).

Overall, school climate has surfaced in almost every study of effective schools (Haberman, 2003). Principals can positively leverage this influence no matter what type of school or climate in which they may find themselves. Even in school environments that have superior and well-executed discipline plans, discipline issues may still arise and must be addressed (Nelson, 2002). According to Ubben (2011), “The school leader of the twenty-first century must have knowledge and understanding of emerging issues and trends that potentially impact the school community” (p. 295). The principal must first understand the pulse of the school and put in motion programs that emphasize effective school discipline practices, thus decreasing behavior problems and imposing self-discipline. These actions will improve the climate quickly, which improves the culture over time (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Mayworm & Sharkey, 2014).

According to Bloom and Owens (2011), principals are expected to be instructional and community leaders. A study done by Bloom and Owens regarding principals’ perceptions on their influence on staffing, curriculum issues, and discipline policies reported that well over half of the principals interviewed indicated that they had significant influence on the discipline policies at their school. This trend held true for principals of both high and low achieving schools. A goal for

educational leaders is to deal with discipline issues in a highly controlled and supportive environment that does not make anyone feel isolated from the population (Buckmaster, 2016).

Feuerborn and Chinn (2012) suggest that to gain support from teachers in the discipline arena, research must be done to gain a better understanding of the perceptions and practices of teachers. According to Lane, Kalberg, Bruhn, Driscoll, and Elliot (2009), a line of research has revealed that a teacher's perception influences his or her support for and consequently their implementation of behavior plans. Misunderstandings, philosophical beliefs that are incongruent to behavior plans, and limited knowledge of behavioral principles all influence the implementation of school discipline practices (Lane, Kalberg, Bruhn, Driscoll, & Elliot, 2009). According to Bambara, Nonnemacher, and Kern (2009), variables related to teacher perceptions and practices were one of the most pervasive barriers to effective school discipline.

A cultural perception survey conducted by Tyler, Boykin, and Walton (2006), examined whether various aspects of culture altered teachers' perceptions of a student's classroom motivation and achievement. The results revealed that there were significant differences in teachers' perceptions of both student achievement and motivation. Culture was in the forefront and teachers lowered expectations when students showed any culturally thematic behaviors (Tyler, Boykin, & Walton, 2006). A research-based program would help with culture, climate, and discipline (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012).

### **Definition and Evolution of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)**

Sugai and Simonsen (2012) defined Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports as a proactive approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture needed for all students. PBIS showed promise and success when put into place for students with disabilities (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012).

PBIS emphasizes a proactive, learning, prevention approach (rather than a punitive approach) to respond to behavior problems (Debnam, Johnson, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2014; Horner et al., 2009). It is an evidence-based practice used to prevent and remediate challenging student behaviors, while concurrently improving academic outcomes (Collins & Ryan, 2016). According to Chin, Dowdy, Jimerson, and Rime (2012), the PBIS framework stresses that teaching appropriate behaviors and setting forth clear behavior guidelines and expectations will help educators to be proactive in the discipline arena. Horner, Sugai, and Anderson (2010) concur by stating that PBIS is gaining traction as being a framework for creating safe and effective environments for learning. The program has been undergoing continuous improvement for the last two decades (Bohanon, Goodman, & McIntosh, 2011; Filter, Sytsma, & McIntosh, 2016). Algozzine, et al. (2012) noted that the framework reduces discipline incidents and increases achievement because more students are in the classroom learning. Successful implementation of PBIS requires consistent execution by leaders in both behavioral expectations and consequences (Horner et al., 2010; Nelson, Martella, & Galand, 1998).

PBIS is a multitiered system that utilizes certain strategies at each level, with each successive tier catering to students that have not been successful or responsive to the more general strategies (Collins & Ryan, 2016; Sugai, 2013; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). The unique needs of each school determine the strategies (Evanovich & Scott, 2016). PBIS schools consider all students a part of Tier 1, which has a school-wide, focus, in general, to develop proactive strategies and interventions to prevent the most common challenging behaviors across the entire student population (Evanovich & Scott, 2016). According to Horner et al. (2010), a smaller group of students will usually require more intensive support (about 15-20% of the student population). Tier 2 is the next step for students that are not responding to Tier 1. For these students, school leaders

implement a second tier designed to offer interventions aimed at preventing the most common failures among the students that do not respond favorably to the school-wide interventions implemented in the first Tier (Evanovich & Scott, 2016; Turtura, Anderson, & Boyd, 2014).

According to Evanovich and Scott (2016), approximately 5% of the population of students in a school do not respond well to Tier 1 or Tier 2. When this is the case, the school implements Tier 3. Tier 3 is the most intensive tier providing individualized academic and behavioral interventions and supports for this group of students. These students are the smallest population, but their continued failures put them more at serious risk for eventual school exclusion and drop out (Carran, Kerins, & Murray, 2005). According to Horner et al. (2010), it is more important to begin with a broad scope of interventions and then progress as needed to more individualized plans. PBIS acts as a logical instrument for recognizing those students who have not been responsive to prevention efforts and therefore gradually provides more concentrated interventions to promote student success (Evanovich & Scott, 2016; Horner et al., 2010).

Stakeholders now realize that discipline includes much more than handing down punishment; it also includes putting a student in a category of being labeled as trouble, when he or she behaves outside of the expected norms (Irby, 2014; Lewis, 2007). However, there are strategies that schools have used to help lower disciplinary punishments. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2014) reported that the suspensions and expulsions in the nation's public schools had dropped 20 percent between 2012 and 2014, largely due to behavior programs such as PBIS. Steinberg and Lacoë (2017) stated, "The news was welcomed by those who oppose the frequent use of suspensions and expulsions, known as exclusionary discipline" (p. 44). On the federal level, the Obama administration "embarked on several initiatives to encourage schools to move away from suspensions and toward alternative strategies" (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017, p. 44).

Because of the call, discipline reform efforts are also underway at the state and school district levels (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014).

The Department of Education reported that as of May 2015, twenty-two states and the District of Columbia had revised their laws to encourage schools to limit the use of exclusionary discipline practices, implement supportive discipline strategies that relied on behavioral interventions, and provide counseling when needed (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). Steinberg and Lacoe (2017) also reported that as of the 2015-16 school year, 23 of the 100 largest school districts nationwide had implemented policy reforms requiring non-punitive discipline strategies and/or limited the use of suspensions.

Most local schools are reviewing their discipline strategies (Losen, 2013; Skiba, 2014). Discipline issues often stem from interactions between students and adults in school, thereby creating a need for a comprehensive plan of action (Cramer & Bennett, 2015). According to Steinberg and Lacoe (2017), strong teachers interact more with their students on curriculum related matters and students spent more time learning. However, weaker teachers have classrooms in which there is frequent student misbehavior. Often when teachers attempt to control the misbehavior, students persist in continued misbehavior, causing adults to make judgment calls. Many schools are turning to behavior programs such as PBIS, as a positive alternative and guide (Horner et al., 2010).

### **Facilitation**

As PBIS showed promise and success when working with students that had not been responsive (mainly students with disabilities), the creators thought that PBIS could benefit students and schools by being used school-wide for all students (Horner et al., 2010).

In this case, school leaders implement PBIS logically and pervasively throughout the school; which is referred to as School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS). After deciding PBIS will be the program used to encourage positive behavior, the school then, with guidance from district PBIS office, forms their own local PBIS team. There are four basic steps that explain the multi-layered framework of PBIS: (a) identification of predictable failures, (b) development of effective preventative strategies, (c) consistent application, and (d) evaluation of outcomes.

When implementing PBIS, the first step in implementation is to predict problem behaviors by type, location, time, and individual (Evanovich & Scott, 2016). In the beginning, little data may be available, but faculty and staff can rely on historical data. However, staff can use the limited information to brainstorm and predict problem behaviors that they have observed (Scott, 2012). The next step is to develop strategies and interventions for the most predictable failures (Windle & Mason, 2004). Leaders desire for students to follow the rules, which are the desirable behaviors students should exhibit. If this is the case, rules must be taught clearly to all students (Malone & Tietjens, 2000; Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008). There should only be three to five positively stated rules across the school (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).

Step three is consistency. When the PBIS team disaggregates data, they consistently make decisions according to the data. The team updates the entire faculty during collaborative meetings. The team should consist of an administrator and five to eight members representative of the faculty (Clonan, McDougal, Clark, & Davison, 2007). The fourth step is the evaluation of outcomes (Evanovich & Scott, 2016). Evanovich and Scott (2016) list three key tasks within the fourth step related to evaluation:

1. Data are used to evaluate a school's specific goals. A school should look at the criteria they set for success. They can determine success by reviewing the data to see if they met the goal.
2. Schools should use the Administrator's Guide to PBIS to identify new predictors of potential failures. As students change, so do behaviors (Skiba, 2014). Data can help predict new problems.
3. Finally, the PBIS team should use data to identify individual students who may be at risk for potential problems (Clonan et al., 2007).

### **Summary**

Current discipline strategies are not working pervasively throughout many schools (Collins & Ryan, 2016). Although society tasks the American public-school system with solving many issues, effectively managing behavior is at the top of the list. Schools face many challenges, including “increased accountability for efforts to improve the academic and social behavior of students” (Greenwood et al., 2008, p. 29).

While the use and effectiveness of programs such as PBIS have been widely studied, researchers have not completed much work on what the actual implementers of the programs believe is working or is not working and how the leader has led program implementation. Often, once a school or district purchases a discipline program, the ones assigned with direct implementation execute either without fidelity due to lack of training or measurement or the program phases out because the implementers feel as if they had little or no input or support. Schools that are effective in their implementation have more than 80% of their students and staff who can indicate the desired positive behavioral expectations for a given school setting (Sugai &



Simonsen, 2012). Sugai and Simonsen (2012) explains PBIS positively affects the culture and climate, and leaders play a big role.

According to D'Auria (2015), undervaluing the importance of culture and climate can block or even diminish leaders' effectiveness. Whatever the plan may be, leaders should take culture and climate into consideration as D'Auria (2015) wrote, "Leaders can significantly shape the climate within organizations" (p. 52). Regarding climate, Ozan (2015) noted,

It is important to create school climate which aims to control students' behaviors and solve their problems; and a climate where students are treated respectfully with positive discipline as a management technique, and where the skills and education required for a successful future are provided. (p. 321)

Moreover, Nelson (2002) stated that without a disciplined atmosphere, teachers cannot effectively teach, and students cannot effectively learn. Principals and teachers are responsible for carrying out an individual school's discipline practices and bolstering success. Leaders must create safe schools by making "difficult decisions about what steps are necessary to protect the school community while ensuring that students are not punished inequitably for misbehavior" (Barton & Nishioka, 2014, p.4).

In summary, for this study, Social Learning Theory challenges assumptions about the ways that school discipline programs serve students (Irby, 2014). With time and effort coupled with the right strategies, educators can be effective and efficient when disciplining students (Bloom & Owens, 2011). Kennedy, Jordan, and Murphy (2017) stated, "Providing a more supportive learning environment for all students requires shifts in educators' beliefs and practices toward safe and positive discipline strategies" (p. 262). The answer may lie within the perceptions of leaders and teachers within the school.

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## **2 SCHOOL DISCIPLINE PRACTICES: THE VOICES OF THE LEADERS**

The intended purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the implementation of a *School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports* (SWPBIS) program by analyzing the SWPBIS data along with the perceptions and practices of teachers and an administrator implementing a SWPBIS program. Chapter one included the guiding research questions, study significance, theoretical framework, and research design. Chapter two includes the participants, data collection and analysis, findings, discussion, implications, and conclusion. This study draws from the conceptual underpinning of constructivism and the literature highlighting the evolution of student discipline practices within schools. Responsive interviews with teachers and an administrator provided an in-depth look into the ways staff handled student discipline in one public middle school.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Schools need plans and systems to be proactive versus reactive when dealing with behavioral issues (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012). More specifically, SWPBIS is such a plan (Sugai, 2003). Such plans are dependent upon the support of teachers and administrators to implement. One step towards achieving the necessary support is to gain a better understanding of the perceptions and practices of educators while identifying potential barriers (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Lane, Kalberg, Bruhn, Driscoll, Wehby, & Elliott, 2009).

This study garnered information to add to the body of literature on student discipline by seeking to understand the perceptions of teachers and a school leader in regards to SWPBIS and discipline. Moreover, the purpose of this study was to investigate the impact that the program had on Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) and school suspensions (both in-school and out-of-school) in one middle school in the Southeastern United States. Positive discipline is defined as a mix of discipline models drawing from a school-wide behaviorist and a socio-emotional approach, relying

more heavily on a more socially just and student-centered discipline approach (Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010; Sharkey & Fenning, 2012).

I conducted an examination of teachers' and an administrator's perceptions of how the school's discipline plans impacted their school's culture. The purpose was to examine how school leaders have led the charge to implement *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* (PBIS).

### **Guiding Questions**

1. What are study participants' perceptions of the impact of leadership behaviors on PBIS implementation?
2. How do study participants perceive the impact of leadership on school climate and student behavior under the implementation of PBIS?

### **Significance of the Study**

Discipline problems are evident in our school systems (Greenwood, Kratochwill, & Clements, 2008; Gresham, 2004). Despite this issue, leaders and teachers have a moral obligation to educate all students. Once educators realize this moral imperative, deep commitment and strategies are needed to help solve problems (Fullan, 2011; Mees, 2008). Schools are complex organizations that require simplification to maintain success thus providing a need for an examination of student discipline practices within the organizational culture (Irby & Clough, 2015). There is unprecedented international interest in the question of how educators influence a range of student outcomes as the behavior of young people in schools appears to be a perennial concern (Hart, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). Many schools have implemented plans such a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in hopes of curbing discipline issues (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). PBIS emphasizes a proactive, learning, prevention approach, rather than a punitive

approach, to respond to behavior problems (Debnam, Johnson, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2014; Horner et al., 2009). PBIS is an evidence-based practice that prevents and remediates challenging student behaviors, while concurrently improving academic outcomes (Collins & Ryan, 2016). According to Chin, Dowdy, Jimerson, and Rime (2012), the PBIS framework stresses that teaching appropriate behaviors and setting forth clear behavior guidelines and expectations will help educators be proactive in the discipline arena.

Stakeholders are asking questions regarding whether students are receiving a quality education as well as the barriers that may exist from making this a reality (Mees, 2008). A part of the educational barrier for some students may be the way school administrators and teachers handle discipline. Disruptions leading to office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions have proven to be costly for students (Allen & White, 2014; Allman & Slate, 2011). Educators have varying views of these disruptions, leading to subjective consequences and outcomes. Each individual molds his or her experience and background with the culture and vision of the leader of the institution. This study of the role leadership plays in implementing discipline in regards to SWPBIS, and the influences and barriers the program has had on discipline could help other educators make better-informed decisions regarding the practices involved in school discipline.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social learning theory (SLT) serves to conceptualize the implementation and perception of effective discipline practice, such as SWPBIS, within this study. Scholars define social learning theory as knowledge that happens when learning, which is a cognitive process, takes place in a social context (Bandura, 1986). SLT can occur purely through observation or direct instruction, even in the absence of motor reproduction or direct reinforcement (Bandura, 1977; Manz & Sims,

1981; McCleod, 2016). Manz and Sims (1981) noted that social learning entails modeling a new behavior to achieve consistent change.

SWPBIS is intended to teach students the desired behavior by modeling it throughout the day (Evanovich & Scott, 2016; Pas & Bradshaw, 2012; Ross, 2012). Both adults and students observe the modeled behavior. The staff then holds students accountable by building-wide observations, rather than only the observation of an individual teacher. Students hold one another accountable (Evanovich & Scott, 2016; Pas & Bradshaw, 2012; Ross, 2012)

For the purpose of this study, SLT grounds itself in the philosophical foundation of constructivism, which in this case explains the differences in perception and reality. Instead of having the revelation of reality, we construct reality when we make meaning (Gray, 2014; Vall Castello, 2016). According to Stake (1995), mentally, people tend to mix new perceptions with old eventually forming reality. Constructivism explains that although experiences originate on the outside or by outside action, only the inside interpretation is understood through lived experiences (Stake, 1995; Walker, 2015).

SLT leadership appears through continuous actions of leaders, skills, habits of mind, and ever-changing competencies creating the need for challenge, redefinition and recreation (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). A connection exists between structure, culture, and agency that shapes the experiences of school leaders and teachers (Meyer et al., 2013). DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) wrote that teachers and other contextual elements influenced the extent that teachers are empowered to enact bottom-up reform. SWPBIS could empower teachers and students to make a difference on their discipline path (Bruhn, Gorsh, Hannan, & Hirsch, 2014).

## **Methodology**

For this study, I chose a qualitative instrumental case study design. According to Stake (1995), most contemporary qualitative researchers nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered. Merriam (2009), concurred by writing, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). According to Merriam (2009), qualitative investigations seek to pose research questions, collect evidence, and produce findings, which are key components. Qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures, data collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particular to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of data (Creswell, 2013).

When seeking to understand the lived meaning of participants from their point of view, it is best to draw from the theoretical and conceptual foundation of constructivism (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Genzuck, 2009). Genzuck (2009) noted that we construct our reality by our individual, social, and historical settings. In-depth interviews afforded me the opportunity to ask questions, listen, and observe participants as they provided the answers in which they have constructed meaning from their world (Creswell, 2013). Observations, data analysis, and document review assisted me in gathering a more comprehensive view of the case study (Stake, 1995).

## **Research Design**

Qualitative researchers attempt to understand the world from the perspective of those living in it (Hatch, 2002; Stake, 1995). Creswell (2007) and Crotty (1998) suggested that this constructivist paradigm is an essential element of qualitative research. In this qualitative study, a case study approach was used to elicit and examine the perceptions of stakeholders. An overarching philosophical underpinning of constructivism frames this study. Through a social



constructivism lens, individuals are seeking to understand the world in which they live and work. Placing an interpreter in the field was a way to observe the workings of the case. While in the field, I was able to observe and to interview study participants in their environment.

This case study elicits the participants' perceptions of school discipline practices within the school. According to Ward (2007), qualitative research is a process in which the researcher values the participants' perspectives in their world and seeks to discover those perspectives that view inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants. Qualitative research is primarily descriptive and relies on people's words as the primary data, by allowing them to express their feelings and personality through the interview (Rossman & Marshall, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

During this study, I sought to understand the perception of how leaders can transfer effective practices directly to the classroom and pervasively throughout the school. Case study is instrumental in accomplishing something other than understanding a particular school (Stake 1995). Case studies are tools that can help with understanding the reality of those administering discipline in hopes of replicating positive results in other school settings. Instrumental case studies do not depend on the ability to defend the typicality of the case, but being able to explain how the unusual case can help illustrate matters that researchers often overlook in typical cases (Stake, 1995). This type of naturalistic inquiry is the most appropriate approach to "understanding the social world in which the researcher observes, describes, and interprets the actions of specific people and groups in society and cultural context" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.880).

## **Participants**

For the purpose of this study, data were gathered from one school site through interviews with the principal and nine teacher leaders. The identified school is PBIS Operational, meaning that the staff has completed at least three years of training and the school has ranked within certification status. The school has also experienced a decline in office discipline referrals over the past few years. Participants represented different grade levels, sixth through eighth, and departments throughout the school, all having worked at the school for at least three years of PBIS implementation. The participants also served in lead roles within the school. I used purposive sampling to select the study site as well as the study participants.

A school system was selected that showed a parallel between positive intervention practices and a reduction in discipline referrals or incidents (Georgia Department of Education, 2015; Georgia Insights, 2017). Once I identified a school district based on proximity of schools and the level of access afforded to me, I narrowed the search to middle schools, as researchers have concluded that more studies are needed pertaining to positive discipline strategies in middle schools in the United States (Dykes, 2015; Vincent, Tobin, Hawken, & Frank, 2012).

## **School Site**

For this instrumental case, the aim was to identify one school as the unit of analysis for purposive sampling, which involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criteria that are vital to the study (Creswell, 2007). The unit of study should fit the chosen criteria. (Stake, 1995). According to Merriam (1998), the researcher should first determine what selection criteria are essential in choosing the people or the sites. The following criteria were used in selecting the school for this study:

1. the school had to have a written discipline plan that included at least three years of PBIS implementation, making it PBIS Operational;
2. the school had climate ratings that ranked higher than the state's average; and
3. the school had decreasing discipline incidents.

For the first criteria, I utilized the PBIS (2018) website in conjunction with the Georgia Department of Education's website to find a school that was PBIS Operational. PBIS identifies schools as follows: Operational (at 3 years of PBIS implementation), Installing (at least 2 years of PBIS implementation), or Emerging (beginning stages of implementation). A school must have taken several steps for operational identification. By this point, the school's PBIS team has participated in the state's training covering the critical elements of Tier 1. Their PBIS teams meet monthly along with an administrator. The school must also have obtained certain marks on their data analysis checklists, surveys, and walk-throughs. The state stipulates that schools must have shown an increase in such scores through each phase to show that discipline plan is working (Georgia Department of Education, 2015). Rock Hill Middle, the pseudonym for the selected school site, is identified as a PBIS Operational school. The staff has participated in training both locally and at the district level. They have earned increasingly high marks on their PBIS rating criteria and walkthroughs. The staff at Rock Hill stated that they did not become operational in the first three years. They waited to apply for status while modifying their discipline plan to mold it into a positive mode of discipline. During their quest to become operational, the school worked on improving their culture and climate, using it as a stepping stone to develop positive discipline strategies.

The second criteria dealt with school climate and how the leadership has helped to shape or promote a positive climate. The National School Climate Center has identified five components for

obtaining school climate rating (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2015). Two of the five components, school perceptions and student discipline, account for half of the rating scale. Both components directly relate to this study. School perception data are gathered via a survey given to parents, teachers, and students. School discipline are gathered using a point system. Each student is assigned a point value based on the discipline consequences received in a year (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2015). The school's climate is then determined to be high, average, or low according to its score derived from a compilation of the above components (Georgia Insights, 2017; Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2015). The state has deemed Rock Hill's climate to be high, measuring at 80, while the state's average is 72. The school is considered a five-star school in the climate category. I compared schools throughout the state using criteria provided by the Georgia Insights database for identifying PBIS schools with improving climates. Georgia Insights criteria encompassed discipline, safe and substance-free, and climate perception.

The final criteria used was the school had to have decreasing discipline incidents. By selecting a school that showed decreasing discipline incidents, the case became unique. Merriam (1998) wrote that researchers often base a purposive sampling on a unique, atypical, and sometimes rare situation. The Georgia Department of Education (2015) Discipline Referral database, was used to identify schools that have decreasing discipline referral data. This school has been able to decrease discipline referrals.

Looking at the last few years of discipline data, according to Georgia's Department of Education (2015) Discipline Referral database, the school system reported at least five PBIS schools with decreasing discipline rates (See Table 1). For specific types of incidents, see Appendix A.

Table 1

*Comparison of School Discipline*

<b>School</b>	<b>Star Rating</b>	<b>PBIS &amp; Supports</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Safe &amp; Substance Free</b>	<b>Climate Perception</b>	<b>Final Score</b>
Rock Hill Middle	5	Active	95	92	80	95
Pine Grove Middle	5	Active	89	90	72	91
Maple Oaks Middle	3	Active	82	91	79	90
Carver Middle	5	Emerging	89	91	76	92
Walker-John Middle	5	Emerging	92	91	76	95

*Note. Georgia Department of Education (2017)*

**Individuals**

Participants in this case study include the school principal and a purposive sample of teachers. I used purposive sampling as it allowed careful selection of participants for the study due to their relevancy, understanding, and experience of the case (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). When using purposive sampling, I desired to “discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore . . . select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p.61).

In order to maintain anonymity, the identity of all participants and school systems was anonymized and will remain confidential. A description of the participants involved in this study, including their gender, race, years in education, and current position is included in Table 2. The group of study participants averaged just over 17 years in education (See Table 2).

Table 2

*Participant Profiles*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Years in Education</b>	<b>Position</b>
Patty	Female	Black	17	Dept. Chair
Mary	Female	White	23	Teacher Leader
Constance	Female	White	15	Dept. Chair
Rob	Male	White	20	Counselor
Marsha	Female	White	15	PBIS Coach
Mary Beth	Female	White	25	Counselor
Drake	Male	White	10	Teacher Leader
Tina	Female	Black	10	SPED Dept.
Jason	Male	White	9	SPED Dept.
Leslie	Female	Black	30	Principal

The criteria for study participants set forth in the study are as follows:

1. Each study participant had to have at least three years' experience working in this PBIS school,
2. Each participant must have served in a leadership role within the school as well as have been specifically recommended because of their work with PBIS, and
3. Each participant must have attended district-wide PBIS training.

In this study, each participant had to have worked within this school for at least three years. Having at least three years, each individual was familiar with the school. They were able to provide a more in-depth perspective when interviewed. Being that this is a middle school with three grades housed within the same building, the participants were familiar with the students and their growth from one to three years. Persons working in a PBIS school should participate in ongoing local training within the context of that school. This training allows them to understand implementation, and more importantly to interpret the data to see the successes while working towards solutions that

address the challenges of specific students. It helps to put a name with a face. PBIS is not intended to label the students, but to label the behavior. According to Creswell (2007), if one is immersed in the school, it gives a better perspective as to the climate and culture of the institution.

The second criteria were that each participant serve in a leadership role and must have had the principal's recommendation. The principal specifically recommended each participant because of his or her knowledge of the school and PBIS. This was key to being able to understand how the participants perceived the implementation of PBIS. Leaders within the school also have a better pulse on how the staff perceives programs and initiatives. Working closely with the masses allowed the participants in this case an inside advantage regarding implementation. In addition, by interviewing the leaders, I was able to understand first-hand the gaps in implementation as they have lived through the emerging and installing phases of PBIS. Being responsible for a department or even a classroom gave them the authority to question, tweak, and welcome change within the organization. Participants were willing to share this vital information.

The third criteria revolved around participant training. Each participant must have attended district-wide PBIS training. According to PBIS guidelines, each school must have a core set of trained PBIS members on a team or committee. During the emerging and installing time periods, some schools may experience great turn-over and/or members may roll off the team for various reasons. This instability creates gaps and uncertainties in the implementation. The school falls behind when they have to constantly train new people to deliver the information and there is not a strong core to keep the momentum going. I needed participants that were in tune with PBIS implementation.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected over a two month period including interviews, document reviews, as well as artifacts, and observations to gain knowledge of the participants' perception of effective school discipline practices. I conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews using the responsive interview model for thirty minutes to one hour using open-ended questions, both pre-determined and emerging throughout the interview (Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I gave selected participants the opportunity to participate in the study through purposive sampling, which according to Patton (2015) is the art of choosing "information-rich cases from which one can learn about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 169).

For this study, I gathered data from one school site through interviews conducted with teacher leaders and the school principal. After obtaining approval from the district, school site, and the university, I sent an email invitation along with an informed consent letter to the principal and teacher leaders via email (See Appendix B).

Once I identified the participants for interviews and obtained consent, interaction between the subjects and myself began and face-to-face interviews were scheduled. I used an interview protocol comprised of semi-structured questions and open-ended questions based on the interview dialogue (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Before the first official interview, to strengthen the qualitative aspect of questioning, I practiced with a colleague to tweak the quality of questions and to gage the timeframe it would take to conduct an interview. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), this is a form of pre-peer debriefing. I developed these questions by researching the literature reviews and guided questions pertaining to alternative discipline strategies. I also shared a draft (via email) of the interview questions with one university professor and two district level administrators who work closely with discipline. One expert works directly with the PBIS department and the other in



the discipline office. When developing the final questions, I integrated their feedback and comments. (See Appendix C).

Interviews took place at the local school site either before or after school hours. Participants were asked to voluntarily share their thoughts, opinions, and practices relating to effective school discipline and school leadership influence on the program. I recorded the interviews via an audio recording device with permission from the participants for transcription and analysis. To explore the experience of the participant, I began with a set of predetermined questions. Next, I followed up with additional questions as needed. According to Merriam (1998), questions provide opportunities for information, feelings, and opinions to be revealed. I asked questions to clarify responses, and the participant had the freedom to elaborate on their responses, to reveal information, and to share unexplored topics.

Interviewing is often the major source of data in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommended using the “responsive interview model” (p. 36) when conducting interviews. Patton (2015) recommended the researcher should specify a minimum sample size based on expected reasonable coverage of the case depending on the purpose of the study. In purposeful sampling, “if the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units” (Merriam, 1998, p. 102). PBIS Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) guidelines suggest that at least 6 to 8 staff interviews be conducted (Todd et al., 2012). Using this model, I conducted 10 interviews to strengthen the study.

I collected data through the process of an interview guide approach of in-depth interviews. Rossman and Marshall (2010) describe the in-depth interview protocol used in qualitative research as a conversation, an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. This conversation is designed to obtain valid and reliable information. Interviews were summarized and forwarded to

the participants for their review. After I completed the interviews, I made corrections and/or deletions accordingly to assure that summarization of the data was correct.

The second source used to capture data in this study included document reviews from two main reports; Operational Data Records and the Tiered Fidelity Inventory along with data from Georgia Insights and the Department of Education's College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI). Operational Data Records look at discipline data observing specifically what the state of Georgia views, with the goal being to reduce the number of minutes that a student serves in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension, thus increasing the instructional time spent in class. The Tiered Fidelity Inventory provided a way to guide and measure PBIS implementation while Georgia Insights and CCRPI provided climate rating data. Operational Data measures included:

1. PBIS End of Year Report from the state: This report provides identifying information such as the Student Enrollment (current FTE count), the year the school started receiving training, implementation, and climate scores. It also contains ODRs, ISS, OSS data.
2. School-wide Information System (SWIS) Reports: The SWIS Suite is a reliable, confidential, web-based information system to collect, summarize, and use student behavior data for decision-making. The three SWIS applications, SWIS, CICO-SWIS, and ISIS-SWIS, align with a PBIS framework and provide the needed data for both universal screenings as well as progress monitoring (PBIS Apps, 2018).

These are secure reports that provide reasonability through cross-checking. These two reports show the number of days of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and the number of Office Discipline Referrals. The state and district's goals are to reduce the number of minutes that

students spend out of the learning environment, thus increasing time spent receiving valuable instructional time.

The Tiered Fidelity Inventory which is completed by the district and the PBIS team provided a single, efficient, valid, reliable survey to guide implementation and sustained use of SWPBIS. Using the TFI, teams measure the extent to which school personnel apply the core features of SWPBIS at all three tiers – either individually or collectively (McIntosh et al., 2017). Schools may take the TFI as:

- An initial assessment to determine if they are using, or need, SWPBIS
- A guide for implementation of Tier I, Tier II, and/or Tier III practices
- An index of sustained SWPBIS implementation
- A metric for identifying schools for recognition within their state implementation efforts

In addition to interviews and document reviews, observations were the third portion of triangulation of data for the study. Observations are key tools for collecting data when conducting qualitative research. The observer is observing and recording data pertinent to the study (Angrosino, 2007, Creswell, 2013). One day, I spent time in the field (at the school) observing the daily routines in the natural school setting. The next observation day, I shadowed the principal to observe interactions between staff and students. During both observations, I was a non-participant taking capturing field notes. Special attention was paid to assess school climate and the way the educators use the locally written discipline flowchart to handle situations. Creswell (2007) suggested that observations begin broadly and then concentrate on the information desired to be obtained from the research questions.

Additionally, I gathered data from the Georgia Department of Education (2015). The state of Georgia recently released a new initiative entitled *Georgia Insights*. Their first release is a portal that houses real-time data in actual context. Schools receive a rating of one to five each year. This rating is a compilation of data, including demographic trends, which supports or verifies that the make-up of the school body used in this study is relatively stable over time. This verification sets the foundation to reasonably infer that if discipline incidents decreased and climate ratings increased in this one middle school, PBIS may be the reason, not extant variables such as percentages of transiency or socioeconomic status variations or fluctuations during the specified time span.

I also reviewed the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) data from the Georgia Department of Education (2015, 2017) and Georgia Insights in order to assess climate data and to analyze any changes over the period of SWPBIS implementation. The U.S. Department of Education (2017) stated, “Teachers and students deserve school environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to teaching and learning. Creating a supportive school climate—and decreasing suspensions and expulsions—requires close attention to the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students” (p.1).

In summary, this case study presents an assessment of a School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support system by examining (a) the number of student office referrals and expulsions, (b) the impact leadership has had on school climate and student behavior during the implementation of PBIS, and (c) teachers' perceptions of SWPBIS implementation (Dykes, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life contemporary bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving

multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2013). This study was designed to identify the perceptions of the participants as they relate to effective school discipline practices. I conducted interviews along with a review of policies and procedures in order to triangulate the data. Interview data, observations, and artifacts became primary sources of data collection. The case study afforded gathering rich descriptions of school discipline and allowed me, as the researcher, the opportunity to look at similarities and differences in regards to perception of effective discipline practices in a school setting (Nelson, 2002).

During the visits, I used artifacts provided by the school to triangulate the data. Artifacts included discipline data, discipline handbook, and PBIS matrices. I used PBIS data that provided information about location, time, and place. First, I looked at the data changes over the last three years. I compared the fluctuations in numbers in the different categories such as places, times, and reasons for the ODRs. The End of the Year PBIS Report provided the same information, yet in greater detail. I was able to see the exact locations within the school in which the students seemed to be receiving a referral. Next, I looked at the time of day in which teachers wrote most of the ODRs. The location and times seemed to correlate with the reasons for the referrals. These artifacts served as the third piece of triangulation of data. By using methodical triangulation, I incorporated multiple sources of data to increase qualitative credibility (Merriam, 1998).

To analyze interview and observation data, I used NVivo 11, a Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) to assist with the preliminary phase of data analysis. Coding includes organizing, classifying, and making sense of the data (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Saldana, 2016; Yin, 2003). Coding allowed me to sort, arrange, and link data to find common themes, trends, and categories among the data. To describe, classify, and interpret the data, I coded the data and built detailed descriptions to develop themes that emerged (Creswell, 2013). For

example, when transcribing each interview, I “coded” or noted similar words, phrases, or topics that each participant mentioned in the interview, placing the information into categories electronically. Classifying began broadly so as not to limit themes and to allow them to emerge organically. The first theme, *the importance of having a cooperative climate and culture*, yielded three sub themes, or codes, such as *the leaders modeling to the staff how to be culturally responsive*; *the staff providing more positive feedback*; and *the PBIS team ensuring that incentives are a consistent part of the motivational plan*. This classifying process was completed using the method of open coding. Open coding is when the researcher codes all data in every possible way (Glaser, 2016). During open coding, the researcher emerges concepts from the raw data and then groups them into conceptual categories. The goal is to build a descriptive, multi-dimensional preliminary framework for later analysis (Saldana, 2016). As it builds directly from the raw data, the process itself ensures the validity of the work (Glaser, 2016). The researcher can become selective and focused conceptually on a particular social phenomenon. The code itself is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or translates data (Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2012). Coding is the transitional process between data collection and more extensive analysis of the data (Saldana, 2016). When taking a deeper dive into the data as Saldana (2016) suggests, I devoted time to closely examine the interviews looking for common sentences, phrases, and ideas that each participant shared. I made both mental and anecdotal notes in a working journal to support what could possibly be emerging themes. This journal proved to be a useful journal for each step of the transitional process so as not leave out key details that helped to answer the research questions. Reading and analyzing the transcriptions helped me to understand my study and direction the data was taking.

After coding each interview transcript, I used nodes to sort the material. A node is an electronic folder that houses the main interview topics (Rowe, 2012). Once the nodes were established, I analyzed the content linking it to a set of categories that stood to help answer the research questions. As a result of this first level process, several possible themes emerged. After the analysis and evolution of the said themes, I was able to determine the major ones. Next, I cross-referenced each theme to one of the research questions to ensure that the themes were correct and had the ability to provide answers to the questions. Cross-referencing included looking at each theme before developing it and pinpointing the connection to the questions. One example would be the theme of cultivating a cooperative culture and climate and how it directly related to one of the research questions, “How do study participants perceive the impact of leadership on school climate and student behavior under the implementation of PBIS?”

During the second phase of coding, I noted both the frequency and the source of each node. When relaying or comparing each node to the research questions, it became clear that three major themes were emerging. The first major theme to emerge throughout the majority of the interviews was the importance of having a cooperative culture and climate both before and during the implementation of this initiative. The second is clear and defined expectations of the staff and students. The third theme is the significance of using PBIS to make research-based data-driven decisions. The themes are listed in order, beginning with the most coded references first. The thematic analysis provides an account of each theme, quotations of evidence, and existing examples of processes implemented, followed by needs for improvement if noted by participants.

### **Findings**

Analysis of the data revealed insights to some of the key factors that influenced the implementation of PBIS at Rock Hill Middle School as well as some of the barriers and

impediments for this initiative from the point of perception of study participants. Since the implementation of PBIS, discipline referrals have steadily been on the decline. This study was conducted with nine teacher leaders and one administrator in one middle school in the Southeastern part of the United States. Three salient themes emerged after identifying and analyzing patterns in the data around the key factors that influenced implementation and climate and behavior within the school. The first major theme to emerge throughout the majority of the interviews was the importance of having a cooperative culture and climate both prior to and during the implementation of this initiative. The second theme is clear and defined expectations of the staff and students. The third theme is the significance of using PBIS to make foundationally sound, data-informed decisions. The themes are listed in order beginning with the most coded references first. The thematic analysis provides an account of each theme, quotations of evidence, and existing examples of processes implemented, followed by needs for improvement if noted by participants.

Information was gathered from interviews, school observations, and document review in a large urban school district in the Southeastern part of the United States. The study site was a PBIS middle school that has seen a decrease in discipline referrals along with an increase in school climate ratings. The findings revealed significant factors that formed the participants' perceptions of leadership behaviors on PBIS implementation along with the impact of leadership on school climate and student behavior.

### **Cooperative Climate and Culture**

One major theme woven throughout the interviews was the importance of the culture being a positive one amenable to sustain a program such as PBIS. A resounding message throughout the interviews as well as throughout the field observations was having a "positive climate" that is also fair. School leaders attribute both academic and behavioral success to PBIS. It would appear that



the school, with the help of PBIS and the support of administration, has made a conscious decision to change its focus. Under the social learning theory, research revealed that learning entails modeling a new behavior to achieve consistent change (Manz & Sims, 1981).

According to Rob, the positive climate changes are coming from the efforts of the staff. He stated, “How students behave now is coming from the adults. And when we started focusing on the positive behavior as a whole team, whole staff, doing that, that’s when we saw a shift. We try to focus on the positive.” Data would support Rob’s declaration as Rock Hill has a five-star climate rating and ranks above schools in the district that have a similar make up (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Mary noted that she had children who attended Rock Hill Middle School and from a parent’s perspective, the climate was positive. She noted that various staff members would often come to her and compliment her children’s behavior. As the literature indicated, intentional integration of culturally responsive PBIS practices should go beyond the examination of data to include conversations around equity, access, and success for all (Better-Bubon, Brunner, & Kansteiner, 2016). The principal, Leslie, started conversations regarding the need for a culture shift early on in her tenure at Rock Hill. She wanted these conversations to address and determine why some students were not succeeding, stating:

Beginning of my second year, I began to talk about the importance of transforming the culture. That we really needed to change the culture. And one of my APs said there's one thing that I think we can do that really. We get them to help propel us in that direction, and it did. And that was PBIS.

According to Fallon, O’Keeffe, Gage, & Sugai (2015), “Research shows that PBIS is best implemented when considering the specific context of the school and needs of students and families” (p. 273). Drake, having worked through and witnessed the transition, referred to the

current school's culture as a "corporate culture" throughout our interview. When asked to define "corporate culture", he said that he meant a "cohesive culture"; one that is whole. He has worked at the school for at least a decade. Drake recalled that while PBIS is not an easy program to implement, it is worth it. He goes as far as to say that in the beginning of his career, he actually questioned becoming a teacher because he did not feel a professional connection with the students and staff. Drake recalls that the culture was not consistent, meaning one hallway may have these unspoken rules. For example, what was acceptable to one grade level or team might not be among another. However, PBIS helped the culture to gel and consistency to be a part of the equation. Upon hearing about PBIS, Drake was skeptical at the onset but now is in awe of the progress at Rock Hill Middle School. He seemed to become more expressive as the conversation continued about the positive corporate culture by emphasizing that is one of giving and receiving. According to Drake, the majority of the staff is on board, and they try to focus on the positive. He noted:

The more positive feedback that you give, the better the relationship that you have with the person you are working with. If you have that positive relationship when you finally do give that one correction, the person that you are giving that correction to tends to trust what you are saying and tends to make better efforts to try to make that correction. So, I believe that giving seven, whether it's seven, whether it's 10, whether it's 15; typically allows for that relationship to be a little bit stronger, more positive and more trusting.

Mary concurred regarding the positive climate and culture. She compared working in a non-PBIS School to working in this PBIS School. Mary said that the culture and climate are different here. Leadership expects the teachers to run the school "The PBIS way". She conveys that this is why the school and the district provide the proper PBIS training. Mary said, "I came in and was told that, 'this is how we do it and, this is what is done.' I thought it was fantastic. I am being trained

well on the subject.” Mary Beth would concur with Mary, as she says that Rock Hill is a wonderful place to work. Mary, along with other school leaders on the PBIS committee, feel that PBIS has helped to stabilize the culture in that it helps the staff to treat students according to their needs. It has provided a window into the staff collectively understanding that not all students and situations are equal. She talked about the school being such a cross-section of students in terms of race, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Her words depicted,

We have extreme haves and extreme have-nots. I think that we implement it, so it doesn't really matter who you are or what your background is, you still have the same opportunities to win as any other person based on your conduct and your behavior and not who you are or where you came from.

Administrators have set the example showing teacher leaders and teachers how to level the playing field. An example would be consistently checking in on students, no matter their Tier, in a positive manner; not just focusing on the negative behaviors. Mary has a good feeling about the way the staff is handling behaviors. She realized that part of an administrator’s job is to deal with negative behaviors, but she notes that administrators want to know about the positives too so they can follow up. They want to be able to say to the students when a negative behavior arises, “Hey, but you’ve had a really great week, so good for you. You made some really good choices.”

The PBIS coordinator, Marsha, is a teacher leader who, according to her peers, is very passionate about the kids and the program itself. Marsha tries to create and sustain the buy-in and keep the culture positive by having short one-on-one conversations with teachers. She focuses on those that may not seem to be on board for whatever reason. She can tell by the number of tiger paws that each teacher gives out. A tiger paw is an incentive that the students receive for random acts of being good. They can turn those paws in, and they become part of a weekly raffle for prizes.

The PTSA often helps with securing the prizes for the drawings. When tracking the data, if a teacher is low in the number of paws given out, she speaks to that teacher from the standpoint of positive feedback. According to Marsha, Principal Leslie frequently gives the teachers positive feedback in the form of notes, emails, or a few simple words. She noted that she tries to help that teacher understand by asking, “Do you like it when Principal Leslie gives you a compliment?” The reply is always yes, so she asks them to relate that to the students. According to Marsha, it works on some teachers more than others. In this same vein, while shadowing Leslie, I observed her giving out several compliments, some in general, and some specific. She told me that part of that may be innate and the other part is a byproduct of PBIS; she has learned that the teachers enjoy incentives just as much. Through this vein, she is modeling how the exchange between the adult, in this case adult-to-adult, is much more valuable than the prize itself. That one-on-one connection is what many humans are looking for in their daily lives. It is obvious that her staff respects and expects this on a frequent basis. Leslie noted,

When I make a conscious effort to reward, whether verbally or in writing, when I must make a correction, it makes it less awkward, especially for the staff member. All corrections are done in love, but it may not be perceived as that in the moment.

PBIS seems to be a positive top-down model, meaning that the buy-in and the tough work started with administrators and the leadership team. The training then strategically spread throughout different facets of the school, with the mission of garnering buy-in from both staff and students. Drake told me that it took a good seven years for the entire staff to buy in. Many people, including himself, were skeptical. According to Drake, they thought it might be “another packaged gimmick-like program.” However, he and many others on the initial team kept the positive vibes going and did not give up. Drake proudly reported that the longer people are in the program, the more they

talk to others, and the word spreads. Small victories have had exponential effects. Teachers are now saying, “Hey this is working.” The climate has improved.

The participants boast of having a high climate score of 80, which is greater than the state’s average of 72. According to Georgia Insights, the state gathers climate data by coding and averaging surveys by stakeholder groups (parents, teachers, and students). For the past three years, Rock Hill has received five out of five stars for continued improvement (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Drake summed up this theme by saying,

After this [PBIS], I love coming to work every single day. I love being able to see not just the positivity in my classroom, but other teachers that might not have actually bought into it, now buying into it and actually using that consistent positive type of philosophy. And I really do believe that is has changed people for the better.

The majority of the participants echoed this sentiment saying that PBIS causes the climate to stabilize and become more positive than negative, establishing a new normal. The positive climate was apparent when I conducted both walk-throughs and when I was traveling through the halls for the interviews. Staff and students warmly greeted and welcomed me. The effort to maintain a positive culture and climate is pervasive throughout the school. Georgia Insights (2017) revealed that the climate rating for the school is above the state’s average.

### **Concise Delivery of Expectations Through Training**

Nine out of ten participants spoke of the importance of every entity: teachers, parents, and students, all being on the same page in regards to expectations. Training and modeling are vital parts of the equation. The staff introduces and teaches expectations through training. This section provides an overview of the expectations along with the teacher and student training that helps model the expectations.

I could see remnants of ongoing training during my observations. During the field observation, I noted that the school's environment seemed calm and transitions were lively but organized. Students moved along as the various class changes and tardy bells rang. The staff was friendly with students and each other. They attribute much of this community-like atmosphere to expectations. Expectations and standards are high and really stressed at the beginning of the year. The principal expects everyone to treat each other with kindness and to show good will. Training has provided the vehicle in which to weave the expectations into the daily framework. Jason said the expectations became part of their 'norms.' They hold each other accountable for upholding and abiding by them. She refers to the expectations as both the written and unwritten "golden rules" of Rock Hill's PBIS program.

Students, as well as teachers, receive training on PBIS in order to know and understand the expectations. Drake and Jason both emphasized that the PBIS team provides separate training to new teachers. As part of their PBIS for New Teachers Training, the PBIS committee reiterates, "You will see more of what you pay attention to." The participants interviewed unanimously declared that PBIS was an expectation of the principal and because they both respected her and desired to see a change in the culture, they took on the charge with a passion.

District training began for the school in 2010. The school implemented PBIS in the 2011-2012 school year. Rock Hill is now a certified operational PBIS school. After teachers received intensive training from the district, they began to make PBIS fit the needs of their students. According to Principal Leslie, "You must inspect what you expect;" hence, expectations and training go hand in hand. Training has provided fluidity throughout the year. After the beginning of the year refresher training, the PBIS Team shared the data with teachers monthly at faculty meetings. According to Patty, the presentations shared help to keep PBIS relevant. The topics vary

depending on what the data has shown the previous month. Teachers and administrators review the school's discipline chart system and the matrix monthly to ensure expectations are clear and relevant. The discipline chart and the discipline flowcharts are data points that are the result of the staff's collaborative efforts (See Appendix E). The chart has 31 violations listed, 15 of which are minor and 16 are major. The administration team expects staff and teachers to handle minor violations.

Examples include inappropriate language, disrespectful tone, tardiness, etc. Leslie has empowered the staff and teachers to handle these situations. She noted, "The majority of the staff is mature in these areas. They are capable of handling these situations. My admin team and I never want to diminish their authority. We try to provide the tools needed." Major infractions that should be handled by administrators include fighting, weapons, and major class disruptions. Rob insisted that flow chart is a 'roadmap'. Part two of the chart system is the flow chart. It lists the discipline direction depending on the infraction. By committing an infraction, the students automatically land somewhere on the chart, but the chart helps the staff determine the course and the destination in a fair manner. The matrix is another reference point used in PBIS implementation (See Appendix F). Teachers review this visible matrix frequently. It lists various areas of the school (classroom, hallway, bus lane, etc.) and the expected student behaviors.

During the meetings, the members take an informal survey or poll to see if certain topics need to be on the agenda for the next meeting. The team members discuss victories and challenges as well as garner possible solutions. The team members then disseminate the information and discuss the expectations on a more specific level during weekly grade level meetings. Having had the opportunity to attend one of these meetings, I would equate it to a 'think tank.' Staff members were discussing PBIS and the impact it is having on students in Tier 1, along with the students that

may need more intensive support. If so, the PBIS team will schedule these students to move up to the next tier(s). This time is set aside so that teachers can spend more time discussing and gathering solutions for students specifically on their grade levels. PBIS committee holds meetings four to five times per year. Mary, who is in charge of the agenda, says that there are called meetings if necessary. At the meetings, the team is able to get a pulse or a sense of how the staff members are embracing PBIS. When I asked about the buy-in rate, nine out of ten participants rated the buy-in rate at an eight or above. The data provided by the PBIS End of the Year Report would suggest that the buy-in rate is rather high as the faculty involvement score is 100. The faculty involvement category includes the faculty's understanding of the expectations, acknowledgments, and definitions of the program.

PBIS also involved training students. Since Rock Hill has a low mobility rate of 11%, participants found the upper classmen capable of doing a wonderful job training the incoming sixth graders. This intuitive training became easier each year. Mobility in context with this study and for the purpose of this analysis is defined as students must have entered or withdrawn from a school between October 1 and May 1. The state's average hovers around 22% (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). The differences in the numbers of students enrolled in the last three to four years have not fluctuated over 100 students, making older students experts on understanding the expectations of the matrix, which is at the core of the behavior plan (See Appendix F).

Tina reported that having a matrix that students have received training on and is visible in all high traffic areas of the school, makes it easier for students to remember and for teachers to refer students to it before a problem arises. During my observation, I noticed that the school has printed the matrix on posters in the classroom, banners in the hallway, and in the student's agendas. It is taught consecutively and exclusively for the first two weeks during morning advisement



lessons at the beginning of school each year during Extended Learning Time (ELT). ELT takes place before the first academic class. Constance noted, “The lessons are structured so when, especially for sixth grade when come in, so they understand.” The teachers go over all parts of the matrix and their responsibilities. This leads to the coveted tiger paws. As previously referenced, students receive tiger paws when they are caught being good and/or doing the right thing, especially when they think no one is looking. Jason reported that he gave a tiger paw to a student that emptied his recycling bend when he was busy helping another student. Drake and Tina both noted that they have a student that yells out in class quite a bit, so when this student makes himself aware of the situation and pauses for the appropriate time to engage, he often gets a tiger paw.

Both noted that this tangible object helps to remind him of the expectations. The tiger paws can be given to help boost a student’s confidence or to help them see how they can get on and stay on the right path. The two weeks of training teach the incoming students and serve as a refresher for the returning students. It was apparent during morning announcements that students understand what is expected. During the reciting of the school’s motto, there was a sacred kind of pride that emulated as they spoke. They were reciting their own private pledge to their school and to each other with the intentions of it becoming second nature. According to Tina, when a teacher pulls a student’s names from the tiger paw drawing, the referring teachers receive a prize as well. The PBIS team also periodically will roll the “prize cart” around randomly and distribute prizes to teachers that are participating. Several participants made a point to let me know how much this means. Surprisingly this motivates teachers to try to meet the expected goal of passing out at least 20 paws per week.

It was clear that during the interviews that expectations are preset and they are on both ends of the spectrum. The students expect to receive tiger paws frequently, and they try to earn them.

Teachers also expect incentives. No matter how large or small, they matter. Tina's words were "Yea; we really enjoy the incentives. It is nice. The fact that they are thinking of me makes me want to work a little harder." Prizes serve as a physical part of the training.

Training gets easier. The study participants, especially Rob and the principal, feel that since the inception of PBIS, staff members do not have to train students on the go, which makes things a little smoother. Rob theorized that because of the high expectations and quality of training, the majority of students know right from wrong and are quite remorseful when they have broken a rule. At that point, a consequence is not a surprise.

Participants echoed throughout the interviews the importance of sharing the expectations through training on the front end. It has helped the discipline numbers decrease and also helped the climate to improve. According to Leslie, taking the time out in the beginning allows students to spend more time in class learning the curriculum. Teachers cover more content and administrators spend more time being instructional leaders rather than disciplinarians. Strong training and clear expectations are key.

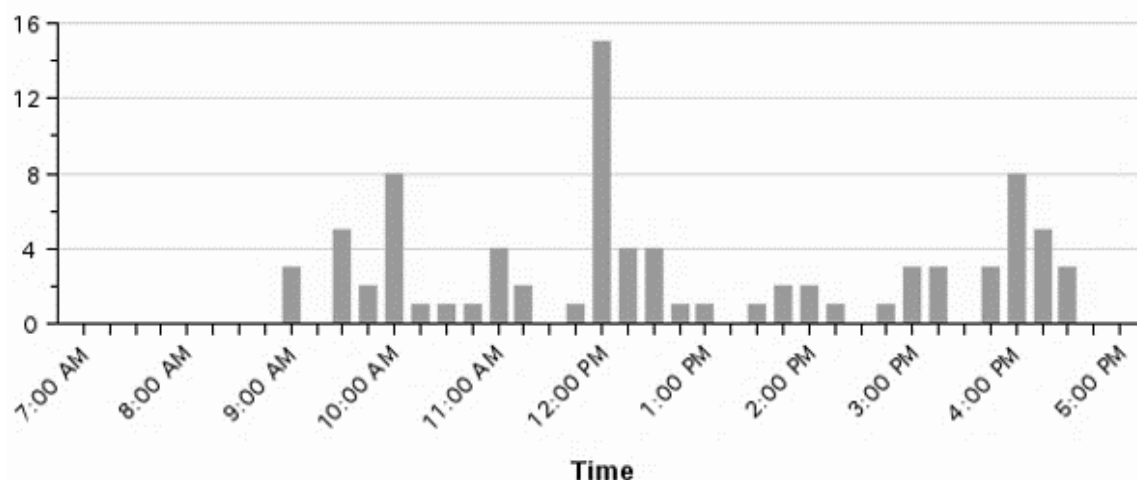
### **Decisions Influenced by Functional, Data-Driven Data**

Throughout the personal interviews with the school leaders, a common theme echoed by all participants was that by having the PBIS system, they have been able to make better informed decisions driven by the data. A major focus of PBIS is to limit the numbers of referrals that students receive so that they can thrive in the classroom verses in some type of isolation, be that suspension or detention. The PBIS committee now looks at the data regularly to find students and teachers that may need assistance. They also look to the district for guidance when reviewing the data. Both the data specialist, Drake, and the PBIS Coach, Marsha, strongly emphasized the importance of using the data to paint the whole picture, first seeking out the problem areas.

An example would be looking at the School-wide Information System (SWIS) data. Staff members look at this data regularly and then make suggestions to administration. Rob noted that they are looking for patterns and then for improvements for those problematic areas. They look at certain types of referrals or if the referrals come at a certain time of the day. At least half of the participants said when looking at the data closely, each recognized that there seemed to be a spike in referrals around noon each day (see Table 3). Rob specifically pointed out that referrals seemed to spike between the times of 11:15am and 12:30pm, which encompassed lunch transitions and connections traffic such as art, music, physical education, theatre, and Spanish. A solution was to go back to the basics and look at the schedule to have more staff in the hallway and to have teachers walk their students to and from the cafeteria. They have also asked the School Resource Officer to be visible when possible to positively interact with students and staff. Teachers were asked to briefly rotate through the cafeteria as well to help monitor.

Table 3

*Referrals by Time*



*Note. Data retrieved from PBIS EOY Report, 2017*

Another area of improvement that the data pointed to was classroom referrals. While there are very few teachers that write students up, the PBIS Evaluation Data showed, according to location, that the referral rate was higher than anticipated for the 2016-2017 school year. When drilling down deeper, it appeared that the most common reason for write-ups was physical aggression. Throughout the interviews, participants pointed out that physical aggression was a non-negotiable. Using the PBIS Evaluation Data Report, the PBIS team found a correlation between the reasons for the referrals, the location. The missing link was surprisingly the teacher. Not only did the students need refreshers from time to time, but the teachers needed refreshers, too. The referral data, *specific to location*, revealed that around 50% of the referrals were issued to students while in the classroom. For students, the PBIS team added more advisement lessons for students geared toward preventing physical aggression, keeping your hands to yourself, and how to react to situations when you get upset with someone, respect personal space, etc. For teachers, more one on one conversations were held as needed. Rob pointed out, “Teachers may need a lesson as well to make sure that they are not adding to the problem and are part of the solution.” Marsha added that any shift in discipline data warrants a tweak. She noted that there should be 80% of students in Tier 1 and 20% of students in Tier 2. The latest TFI report, completed in December of 2017, identified Rock Hill as having 77% of students in Tier 1, 18% in Tier 2, and 5% in Tier 3. Therefore, the school is on track with Tier 1. However, the district representatives noticed that the PBIS team was treating Tier 3 students as Tier 2 students. Conversely, staff should look at Tier 1 students with even minor offenses as a part of Tier 2. The PBIS committee started the process of tweaking the Tier identification process by using the data.

The PBIS team used the Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance Reports (ABC) from the district and the state as well as their in-house office discipline referral data to better inform the

decisions. They have now implemented a new system in which a teacher can nominate a student that may or may not have a discipline record. With this referral system, several participants feel that this allows for preventive measures such as more frequent check-ins, visits with the counselor or administrators to keep students from increasing up the ladder to the next Tier. Students with external behaviors are easier to notice than the ones with internal issues. Marsha referred to those students as “under the radar friends”. They may be super quiet or maybe not be turning their work in, but not an outward behavior problem.

By looking at the data and making solid decisions, referrals have decreased (see Table 4). According to the PBIS end of the year reports, between 2010-2014, there was a 47% decrease in office referrals, and between 2015 and 2016, there was a 49% decrease. Currently, 96.77% of students at the school have either 0-1 referral. The national average is around 70%, and the PBIS school average is around 85%.

Table 4

*Referrals by year*

<b>School Year</b>	<b>Referrals</b>
2013-2014	634
2014-2015	310
2015-2016	216
2016-2017	228

*Note. Retrieved from local school discipline database, 2017*

When I asked the principal if she thought PBIS played a part in the decreasing referrals, she said, “I’m confident PBIS has everything to do with it cause as you know, with PBIS, what we

impressed upon the children the expectations we expect, as far as the behavior and the data proves it.”

School leaders noted that in 2016, a slight increase in referrals existed. To reverse this, along with new teacher training, the PBIS coach held trainings in the form of one-on-ones with teachers. She targeted the ones that seemed to be struggling with passing out tiger paws and/or seemed to display a pattern of writing a high number of office referrals. According to Marsha, this was often times in both cases mainly veteran teachers who do not see the value in PBIS, and they felt that students should not be rewarded for behaving appropriately or for doing the right thing. She tries to coach the teacher from a peer standpoint when this happens. Rob shared that when looking at the data, they concluded that teachers needed more training in the area of de-escalation and how to react in certain situations. Rob stated,

There should never be a situation where an adult escalates the situation...cause many times students get referrals because of that. Where it's the adult, who actually if they had reacted in a different way in the beginning of the interaction, it may have helped, and it may have kept a student from escalating.

Close data disaggregation is important when trying to prevent referrals and keep students inside the learning environment. Marsha emphasized, “Using the data carefully, but not neglecting that one-on-one connections with students and staff makes a difference. Sometimes talking to that one child on the right day and at the right time could really make a difference.”

## **Discussion**

The intended purpose of this qualitative study was to measure the degree of fidelity for the implementation of a School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports program in one middle school. Discipline numbers and levels tend to be higher in middle schools (Cramer & Bennett, 2015). It is

at this level of schooling that both educators and students seem to make a decision about their educational paths (Bruhn et al., 2014). Students receive labels and then start to believe them. Educators often use ineffective policies such as zero tolerance, exclusion, and discretionary discipline to deal with unruly students. Frequently these students are at a disadvantage because of the harsh punishments. Research shows that when students have not had ample seat time in the classroom, it reduces their chances of being successful in their educational career (Kristonis, 2015). Social Learning Theory provided the theoretical framework for the study as it aids in conceptualizing the implementation and perception of effective discipline practices such as PBIS.

During this study, I was able to identify three major themes that stood out within the implementation of PBIS within the school: the importance of a positive climate and culture, high expectations for all, and making solid data-driven decisions. The first theme relates to culture and climate. According to Meyer et al., 2013, a connection exists between structure and the culture of a school. The culture within itself shapes the experiences and perceptions of the members of the institution. Hallinger (2000) would concur as the third dimension of his instructional leadership construct includes promoting a positive school learning climate and culture. It was evident when speaking with participants that the culture and climate is of the utmost importance to them and to the students. It is significant to note that all participants spoke of how the culture is now positive. However, that was not always the case.

One participant specifically recalled that before the implementation of the PBIS program, he questioned entering the teaching profession and that culture and climate made it a chore to come to work. He was exhausted and not feeling very successful. However, now he enjoys coming to work daily and looks forward to the challenge of molding young minds. I could pick up on this positive vibe during my observation and shadowing of the principal. As she walked down the hall

in the morning, she greeted all staff that she came across. However, not only did she greet them, she seemed to know a tidbit about what was going on in their lives. She asked one teacher about her son's upcoming wedding. The teacher's face beamed. She asked another teacher about her graduate class and how it was going. There was a good buzz in the mornings. She took pride in modeling this behavior. She has led the way in changing the perception of the school. It was a slow process, but they stuck with it. The data showed the improvement in both climate and academic standings (Georgia Department of Education, 2017).

Expectations were a large part of the participants' conversations. The interviewees tied behaviors in with expectations and training. While the participants realized that teaching is frequently interrupted by students who exhibit inappropriate behavior (Hollingshead, Kroeger, Altus & Trytten, 2016), they emphasized that expectations are a significant part of behavior improvement. Educators must model and teach students the expected behavior. Interestingly enough, during this study, I found it necessary to note that many of the participants disclosed that PBIS helped to uncover unwanted behaviors of both the teachers and the students. They said that teachers could not simply blame all unwanted behaviors on students. Adults have a role in the equation. In fact, the school is still improving in this area. When the PBIS team dug deeper into the referrals and the causes of the write-ups, they found that many times, the adult's behaviors hampered or rather fueled the fire verses diffusing the situation.

This seemed to come as a surprise to many of the teachers, according to the participants. However, once the PBIS committee looked at the data, they were not surprised that it was mainly the veteran teachers that needed the most assistance. Veteran teachers seemed less apt to adapt to the behavior plans feeling that students should behave simply because it is their obligation to do so. PBIS taught the staff that it is not about the number of years that one has been teaching, but about



the number of years that one has been growing. Kristonis (2015) wrote that teachers must look in the mirror when discipline problems arise to see if they are part of the problem or part of the solution.

Once the PBIS committee realized that the behavior of students *and* some of the staff members may be a problem, they elected to provide more one-on-one intensive training for teachers that may be struggling in this area. The PBIS coach and/or the administrative team, inclusive of the principal, had to have fierce conversations at times to ensure the expectations were clear and implemented. The goal was not to embarrass or ridicule anyone but to work towards a solution. While working towards this solution, they quickly realized that they needed to incentivize the teachers as well as the students. A way to do this was to recognize the teachers simultaneously. When a teacher called a student's name from the drawing, the teacher that awarded the tiger paw was also given a small prize. In some ways, the tiger paws that were given out for good behavior to students began to serve a dual purpose; to keep the teachers engaged just as much as the students. Rock Hill needed a solution that would allow them to provide a quality education to all students (Mees, 2008). The core team could not do it alone. If this seemed to work, Mary said, "Let's find what works, and do it."

Additionally, the topic of data-driven decisions came up frequently during the interviews. In the beginning stages of PBIS, there is little data available (Evanovich & Scott, 2016). It was a struggle for Rock Hill to gain buy-in from some of the staff members because there was no foundation available. One participant expressed feeling as if "we were building the plane as we were flying it." There were no blueprints directly related to the school itself. Skeptical staff members were reluctant because of the time and effort it would take to make the blueprints their own; to build the foundation according to the needs of the school. It turned out that by not having

data, the staff members, mainly the PBIS committee, felt that they worked harder, yet had a better understanding of their school.

The committee turned to what they had prior knowledge of, the climate and the expectations to get them started. By attempting to improve in these two areas, the staff began to see a change in the perception of the school. This change transcended, and the school could see the positive results in the data. The culture improved, which made the climate more of a desirable one. Shortly thereafter, referrals began to decline. The need for administrators to speak to students and parents in the role of a disciplinarian decreased. The administrative team and teacher leaders had more time to concentrate on the reason that students were there in the first place, to take advantage of teaching and learning (Khalil & Brown, 2015).

### **Implications**

Through this study, the perceptions of these school leaders afforded an individual insight into what was necessary to successfully implement and sustain Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in one middle school in the Southeastern part of the United States. The results from this study indicate that several key factors helped to build and sustain PBIS which have both implications for policy and practice. For any major initiative, each of the three key themes discussed in this study play an important role in the success of the program. These themes were as follows: (a) maintaining a cooperative climate and culture, (b) setting and maintaining high expectations for teachers and students, and (c) making solid data driven decisions.

Moreover, this study revealed findings that have implications for school leaders as they contemplate the implementation of PBIS in their school. For example, when implementing PBIS, school leaders must first analyze the structure of the organization, which means having a pulse on the staff and students to have forethought about the desired result. The leader, as this one did, should first decide what needs to change in the school. After being at the school for one year,

Principal Leslie made the decision to work towards changing the culture of the school. She felt as if it needed to be more positive. The rate of discipline referrals was high; in fact, it was higher than the county's average. The culture was unstable and the climate was unfriendly.

The students did not seem to be very happy, and as a result the teachers were frustrated. No longer willing to settle for mediocre test scores or climate ratings, she and her administration team decided on PBIS and began to scout out staff members that would be on board and have buy-in from the beginning. After receiving verbal confirmations of supports, she assembled a team and district training began. The findings in this study indicate that from the beginning, culture is important and that implementation must be a shared effort within the culture. The willingness to implement PBIS must be there (Sugai, 2013). The leader has to garner the respect of the staff also. Initially, some were unsure of the program, but they went along with it because they respected the leader. She earned that respect while trying to change the culture.

This work indicates that expectations are key. Teachers and administrators communicate expectations through training. Training should come from the district and the local levels (Horner, Sugai & Anderson, 2010). Implementers of PBIS know that the program does not come with a script. It is a framework that should be effectively molded to fit the needs of the school. Once the core PBIS team is trained, then they are tasked with training the rest of the staff. For leaders that are either in the implementation phase or contemplating beginning the programs, it is imperative to note that time should be taken to ensure that all staff members understand what PBIS is and the goal of the program. This is also true for teachers, parents, and students. PBIS is an all hands-on deck program that requires support from the administrators, staff, students, and parents. Teachers especially should be PBIS ambassadors for the program. They should view themselves as being

leaders, whether of a department or a classroom. Marrying leadership and ambassadorship strengthens the creditability of PBIS.

For those seeking to implement PBIS, making data-driven decisions is vital to the short and long-term success of the program. Findings in the study revealed that there were gaps in implementation. The gaps existed between what the school put in place as guidelines and what the discipline data was showing in the first few of years. The data derived from End of the Year Reports and the state's report card tells a story about the climate and the discipline of a school. The PBIS team should consistently look at data to drive the program forward. For example, this team looked at referrals to determine the type, frequency, and the location. The most common type of referral was physical aggression. After digging deeper, the team discovered that the teachers and students needed a more customized type of training to combat behaviors on both ends. These classroom referrals were much too frequent. As far as location, the referrals were happening in certain areas of the school or blind spots that were not part of the normal coverage area for the staff. The team corrected this issue by tweaking schedules and staff duties.

When first implementing a program such as PBIS, the participants should be made aware that certain data sets will not be available at the onset of the program. This data comes with time as the school moves towards emerging, then installing, and finally operational. Rock Hill is operational, but it took a few years to get to that point. However, putting in the work during the initial implementation stage seemed to pay off in big dividends. The discipline referral rate is decreasing and the school's climate score is increasing. As Leslie stated, "It all began with a decision to change the culture, believing that the other factors would fall into place as people began to feel better about their work place and take pride in their craft." Before PBIS implementation, the culture was not as cohesive or collaborative. Leslie was on a mission to change that.

In light of both the literature focusing on the circumstantial factors affecting high discipline rates of offenses in public school, the key findings from this study affirm the need to find better and more effective solutions to discipline issues. Current solutions to discipline problems such as zero tolerance, and exclusionary discipline are not working well. Schools need solutions that will ensure that our young people do not just have a level playing field designed for all, but a field that we individually level for them. It is our moral imperative (Fullan, 2011).

### **Limitations and Biases**

According to Gay and Airasian (2000), limitations are conditions in which the researcher has no control. One limitation of this study is that it is limited to the perceptions of participants and stakeholders at one middle school. Participants were directly involved with PBIS. The perceptions of district-level officials or students were not included or mentioned. Additionally, the study took place in one middle school in one Southeastern state. While the data is representative of the school, the school is not representative of the school district or the state as a whole. Findings may not transfer to other schools in the system, the state, or country.

A limitation of the study was the ownership of different constructs of the meaning of discipline and classroom management. The study was only viewed from the participants' perspectives allowing them to share their experiences and beliefs about discipline.

Another limitation was the unit of measure used for school climate, Georgia Insights; was the only metric used. Other data inputs using different tools to measure culture and climate may have been available.

Further research could add to the body of literature by exploring multiple school levels such as elementary and high school as well as different levels of leadership beginning with district

office personnel. In addition, participants in the study could include faculty members that are not directly involved in PBIS to provide a comparison of perspectives.

In studies of a qualitative nature, researchers must identify potential research bias to aid in trustworthiness. The researcher's role is to report the perceptions of the participants while engaging in self-reflection, remaining aware of potential bias throughout the process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this study, I am an administrator in a public-school system. In order to address possible bias, final transcripts were reviewed by participants to ensure accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, I used an audit trail. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), an audit trail is a detailed accounting of data collection, processing of data, and the documents created during the study. An audit trail provides a sense of interrater reliability to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I will keep all raw data and any written notes or information gathered during the study in a secured location for the audit trail. I used peer debriefing to establish credibility. Lincoln and Guba stated that peer debriefing is "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain implicitly within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308).

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the existing literature on PBIS in general. However, this study is unique in that few studies of SWPBIS, if any, investigate the implementation fidelity in middle schools in the Southeastern United States using the National and local SWPBIS guidelines in conjunction with tools such as the PBIS End of the Year Report and the Tier Fidelity Inventory.

When reviewing the data from this study, I have come to a number of conclusions about discipline and the implementation of PBIS in schools, specifically, a middle school. When first implementing a program such as PBIS, the participants should be made aware that certain data sets

will not be available at the onset of the program. This data comes with time as the school moves towards emerging, then installing, and finally becoming operational with a fully functioning program. The mission of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports is to “facilitate positive change in student and staff behavior.” They accomplish this by student and staff training, analyzing the data and by using incentives. Relating the incentives to the school’s theme or motto adds more meaning to the program. In this instance, they were the Rock Hill Tigers, so their incentives were known as Tiger Paws used for ‘Paws-itive Reinforcement.’

This study was designed to identify the perceptions of the participants relating to the impact of leadership behaviors on PBIS implementation and to understand how they perceived the impact of leadership on school climate and student behavior. Many schools have fallen short of delivering effective education to students in part because of discipline issues and concerns (Mees, 2008). The framework of this qualitative inquiry highlighted perceptions of effective discipline practices as seen by stakeholders in order to shed light on positive practices to add to the body of literature. Being that there are limited studies that show the relationship and benefit of having a positive behavioral intervention program in middle school (Dykes, 2015), the information and data that I gathered will add to the body of literature. Public schools in America need to find plans that are working for their clients: strategies that are pro education, verses pro punishment. In closing, Principal Leslie powerfully summarized Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in her school by boldly declaring,

My school needed a change. My teachers needed a change, but most of all my ‘students’ needed a change. I took an unspoken oath to teach, serve, and support everyone that walks through those doors. How can I serve them if those doors are constantly revolving because of poor discipline strategies? How can we educate them if we are sending them right back

out? These adolescents are our future. Where is the human compassion? PBIS has helped us to find that compassion. The demanding journey of PBIS is well worth the outcome.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

School	Threats Intimidation	Battery	Bullying	Disorderly Conduct	Drugs/ alcohol	Fighting	Sexual Offenses	Other Discipline Incidents
Carver	78	4	20	11	1	17	28	237
Pine Grove	63	5	7	4	9	42	30	193
Maple Oaks	63	6	7	21	10	42	27	299
Rock Hill	27	0	0	1	0	14	8	63
Walker-John	36	0	5	8	3	16	13	90
TOTAL	204	15	39	33	131	89	106	882

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Letter

Date:

Greetings

I am writing to tell you about a study entitled, *School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS): A Case Study Analyzing Principal Leadership and Discipline Direction in one Middle School* being conducted by Sonya Brown, a colleague of mine. She is a doctoral student at Georgia State University.

The purpose of this research study is to determine to what degree the school, with effective leadership, has implemented School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) with fidelity and the impact the program has had on Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) and suspensions, both in school and out, in one middle school in the Southeastern United States.

You may be eligible for this study if you meet the following criteria:

- Are currently teaching in a PBIS school
- Familiar with PBIS and how it is implemented in your school
- Regular education or special education teacher
- Have teacher leadership responsibilities at the school

#### **Obtaining Your Consent:**

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please click on the link below. Clicking here will take you to the consent form. After giving consent, you will be contacted via email and asked to grant a 30-minute interview. It is important to know that this letter is not to direct you participate in the study. It is your decision; your participation in this study is voluntary. Please do not feel obligated to respond to this email if you are not interested in the study. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. You may contact Sonya Brown ([sbrown182@student.gsu.edu](mailto:sbrown182@student.gsu.edu)).

Sincerely,

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol for Teachers

Opening

[Participant

Name]

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me at this time. I know you have an extremely busy schedule and I appreciate your willingness to participate in this important study regarding SWPBIS in your school. I have several main questions to ask you today. As we talk, I may think of follow-up questions as well. If at any time, you do not wish to answer a question, or would like to end the interview, please let me know. I anticipate the interview lasting thirty minutes.

1. As you get started, would you confirm that you received the screening consent form that was sent via email and that you are receiving a written copy to sign now? Also, do you recognize that interview will be audio recorded? [pause] Thank you.

### Main Interview

#### Background Questions:

2. How many years having you worked in a PBIS School?
  - Were all of these years at the same school?
3. What Leadership responsibilities do you have with PBIS?
4. Are you a member of the PBIS team?

5. Are you a General Education, a Special Education teacher, or combination?
6. What teacher leadership opportunities have you had in the school?

Implementation Questions:

- 1) What are the school rules?
- 2) Have you taught the school rules/behavioral expectations this year?
- 3) Have you given out any rewards for appropriate behavior in the last 2 months?
- 4) What types of student problems do you or would you refer to the office?
- 5) Is there a school-wide team that addresses behavioral support in your building?
- 6) Does your team use discipline data to make decisions?
  - When was the last time discipline data was shared with you?
- 7) Has your team taught/reviewed the school-wide program with staff this year?
- 8) Who is the team leader/coach?
- 9) Have you noted any change in the number of ODRs you have issued since you began to implement the PBIS School-wide framework?

**Conclusion**

This concludes our interview for today. I really appreciate your time. After I look over the transcript of our conversation, may I contact you if I have further questions? Also, I will send a copy of the transcript to you for your review to make sure that I have adequately captured the conversation. Thank you. If you have further questions for me, please feel free to contact me at any time. Do you still have my contact information? Wonderful. Thank you so much for participating in this interview. Have a great day!

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Protocol for Administrator**

Opening

[Participant

Name]

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me at this time. I know you have an extremely busy schedule and I appreciate your willingness to participate in this important study regarding SWPBIS in your school. I have several main questions to ask you today. As we talk, I may think of follow-up questions as well. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question, or would like to end the interview, please let me know. I anticipate the interview lasting between forty-five minutes to one hour.

1. As you get started, would you confirm that you are receiving a written consent form now and that you also recognize that the interview will be audio recorded? [pause] Thank you.

### **Main Interview**

#### **Background Questions:**

2. What is your educational background?
3. What is your education background in leadership and management training?

4. Total years as a local level administrator?
5. Number of years in current district, number of years as in current position?
6. What were your leadership positions before current role?

### Implementation Questions

#### ***Let's talk about your discipline system***

- 1) Do you collect and summarize office discipline referral information? Yes No If no, skip to #4.
- 2) What system do you use for collecting and summarizing office discipline referrals?
  - a) What data do you collect? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) Who collects and enters the data? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) What do you do with the office discipline referral information?
  - a) Who looks at the data? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) How often do you share it with other staff? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) What type of problems do you expect teachers to refer to the office rather than handling in the classroom/ specific setting?

#### ***Let's talk about your school rules or motto***

- 5) Do you have school rules or a motto? Yes No If no, skip to # 10.
- 6) How many are there? \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) What are the rules/motto?
- 8) What are they called?
- 9) Do you acknowledge students for doing well socially? Yes No If no, skip to # 12.
- 10) What are the social acknowledgements/ activities/ routines called (student of month, positive referral, letter home, stickers, high 5's)?

#### ***Do you have a team that addresses school-wide discipline? If no, skip to # 19***

- 11) Has the team taught/reviewed the school-wide program with staff this year? Yes No
- 12) Is your school-wide team representative of your school staff? Yes No
- 13) Are you on the team? Yes No
- 14) How often does the team meet?) \_\_\_\_\_
- 15) Do you attend team meetings consistently? Yes No
- 16) Who is your team leader/facilitator? \_\_\_\_\_
- 17) Does the team provide updates to faculty on activities & data summaries? Yes No  
If yes, how often? \_\_\_\_\_
- 18) Do you have an out-of-school liaison in the state or district to support you on positive behavior support systems development? Yes No  
If yes, who? \_\_\_\_\_
- 19) What are your top 3 school improvement goals?
- 20) Does the school budget contain an allocated amount of money for building and maintaining school-wide behavioral support? Yes No

- 21) Some culminating questions: Are there any other ideas that you would like to share that have not been covered?

This concludes our interview for today. I really appreciate your time. After I look over the transcript of our conversation, may I contact you if I have further questions? Also, I will send a copy of the transcript to you for your review to make sure that I have adequately captured the conversation.

Thank you. If you have further questions for me, please feel free to contact me at any time. Do you still have my contact information? Wonderful. Thank you so much for participating in this interview. Have a great day!

## Appendix E





## Appendix F

### Rock Hill's PBIS Matrix

	School Arrival/Dismissal	Bus	Hallway	Classroom	Cafeteria	Restroom
<b>Respectful</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use an indoor voice</li> <li>Listen to all staff members</li> <li>Listen to a.m. and p.m. announcements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Follow bus rules</li> <li>Listen to bus driver</li> <li>Use kind words</li> <li>Sit in my seat properly</li> <li>Keep hands and feet to myself</li> <li>Use a quiet voice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Walk to the right</li> <li>Keep hands and feet to myself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use appropriate language and tone</li> <li>Raise hand to speak</li> <li>Treat others as you want to be treated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Talk quietly</li> <li>Keep hands and feet to yourself</li> <li>Listen to all adults</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use in a timely manner</li> <li>Keep hands and feet to yourself</li> </ul>
<b>Honorable</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use <u>only</u> assigned breakfast cart near HR</li> <li>Follow dress code</li> <li>Proceed to <u>your</u> grade level hallway</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Go directly to bus when <u>my</u> bus has been posted</li> <li>Exit/Enter bus at <u>my</u> correct bus stop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have signed agenda</li> <li>Follow silent transition rules, even when adults are not present</li> <li>Provide true information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complete <u>my</u> work</li> <li>Help others when appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pay for what you choose</li> <li>Sit in assigned area</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conserve materials</li> <li>Enter with permission</li> </ul>
<b>Responsible</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remain in cafeteria until 8:45 a.m. bell rings</li> <li>Go directly to destination</li> <li>Watch for bus arrival and location during p.m. dismissal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arrive to my bus stop on time</li> <li>Know the location of my bus in bus lanes</li> <li>Sit in my assigned seat</li> <li>Keep bus aisles clear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Move safely and quickly</li> <li>Move through Hall "C" properly-Follow the traffic flow</li> <li>Be silent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bring all materials needed</li> <li>Participate</li> <li>Take care of property</li> <li>Use locker at correct time</li> <li>Arrive on time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clean up after yourself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Report vandalism</li> <li>Flush</li> <li>Wash hands</li> <li>Clean up after yourself</li> </ul>